SOLITARIO'S EYES By Lucius Shepard

THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

SEPTEMBER

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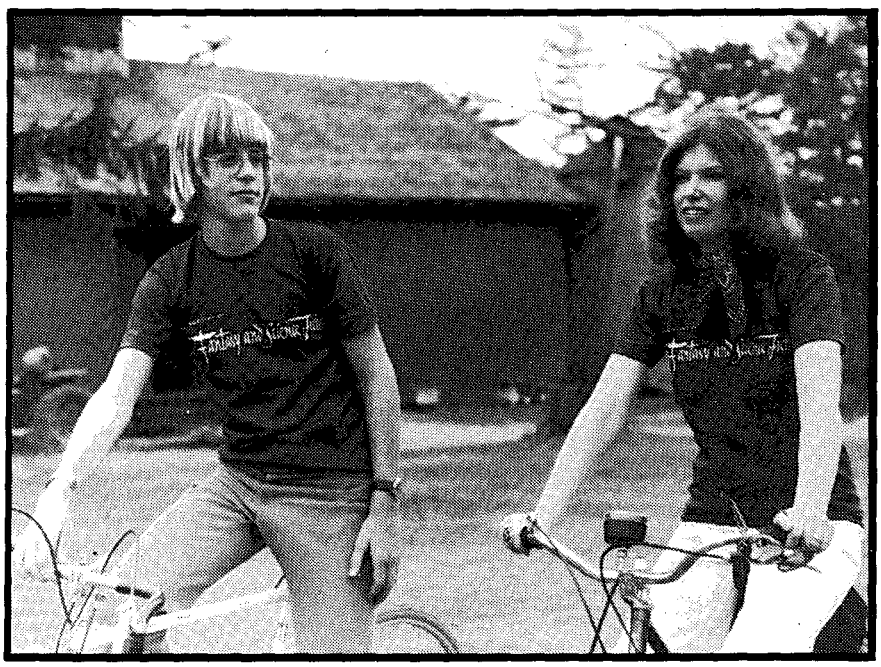

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Bob Leman wrote "Window," "Feesters In the Lake," and most recently, "The Tehama," (December 1981). His new story is about an uncommonly attractive 300-year-old witch who comes to live in the Appalachian town of Rumford's Mill. Like all witches, she picks out a sinister looking house, which turns out to be more nastily appropriate than she could have dreamed...

Unlawful Possession

BY
BOB LEMAN

A very wicked woman lived in a village in New England; she was in fact a witch, and was more than three hundred years old. She had contrived, however, by supernatural means, to retain her youth in every respect save that of actual chronology, so that in appearance she remained as rosy and fresh and altogether appetizing as any centerfold to be found at the newsstand. But because she had lived in the town for more than seventy years, and had no wish to excite comment by her youthful appearance, she wore heavy veils on the rare occasions when she went out into the streets, and always walked with the gait of a very old woman.

The necessity for thus disguising her appearance was a great inconvenience to her, but it was an inescapable part of practicing witchcraft in a village. The big city, with its tradition of anonymity and tolerance, would have afforded her a better opportunity to conceal an irregular way of living than did this small agricultural community, but the Devil communicates with his earthly minions by techniques that were instituted in very ancient times, and these embody to this day certain requirements which are necessarily rural. There are, as a matter of fact, no true witches at all in the great cities. The practicing witches of these United States (and there are fewer of them than one might suppose) are to be found only in our small towns and — less frequently — on isolated farmsteads. You have no doubt sometimes seen buttoned-up, sinister-looking houses on decaying small-town streets, and wondered who lived there, and what might go on behind the locked shutters. Most of these houses, as it happens, shelter nothing more than

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pitiable daft recluses; but one out of fifty or so is the lair of a witch.

The witch called herself Sally Wheeler. It was not her original name, of course, but only the latest in a series of names she had used over the years as she moved from town to town making fresh beginnings. The time had now arrived for another move and another name. The necessity for disguise was becoming unacceptably burdensome, and it was plain that if some accident were to expose her real person, there could not fail to be a great deal of gossip, and perhaps even widespread publicity, since it was well known in the village that there was no possibility whatever that she could be less than eighty years old.

Much poring over the atlas and a considerable amount of correspondence with chambers of commerce brought her at last to a choice, and it remained only to make an inspection in person. She had chosen a town at a considerable remove from New England, a northern Appalachian community of static population and uneventful history called Rumford's Mill. On a morning in June she arrived at the county airport, rented a car, and drove to the town. She parked on Main Street and walked briskly to the offices of Watkins Realty, Inc.

She was not in disguise. The veil and musty dress and senile gait had been left in the rest room of the bus station in Boston, and it was an energetic and uncommonly good-looking young woman who presented herself at the realtor's desk. "Mr. Watkins?" she said, "I'm Meg Hathorne." It was the name she had chosen for the next chapter of her life, and it was, as it happened, her true and original name. It seemed safe enough to use after three centuries, and she took some satisfaction in reverting to it, knowing that in the dusty archives of a certain Massachusetts town there were entries against the name that were very nasty indeed.

"Mrs. Hathorne," Watkins said. "Welcome to town. I have a house here that I think will suit you to a T. Seems like just what you want, from your letter." If it appeared to him that her wants were somewhat odd, he gave no indication of it, and indeed one might have supposed, from his manner, that rich young beauties in search of decayed mansions on the outskirts of town were an everyday occurrence in Rumford's Mill. "We'll take my car," he said.

She did not like the house at all. It was too new, too small, too close to other houses, and did not have enough trees round about. She complained bitterly. "Is this all you've got, Mr. Watkins?" she said.

"Oh, I've got others," he said, "But I don't think they'll fill your bill as well as this one."

They drove about the purlieus of the town and looked at houses. None suited her. "I'm really disappointed, Mr. Watkins," she said. "I do very

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much like this town."

They were at that point driving down Donley Street, near the place where the street's name changed to County Road Seven. In the remote years when the town had been growing, its growth had been in other directions, so that the street was at this point already a country lane, leafy and peaceful and sparsely inhabited. A driveway flanked by huge old lilacs caught the witch's eye. "Is there a house back there?" she said.

"Oh, yes, there's a house," Watkins said. "Not for sale, though."

"Let's look at it, anyway."

They drove up a neglected driveway that wound through a copse of old trees and emerged in front of a ruinous mansion, a dilapidated and weather-stained pile overgrown with dead vines.

The witch evinced total delight at the sight of it. "It's perfect," she said. "I'll take it."

"It's not for sale," Watkins said.

"Of course it is," she said. "Just look at it. They'll sell it. Who owns it?"

"The fact is," Watkins said, "the fact is that, uh, I do. I live here."

"Well," said the witch, "that's all right, then. How much do you want?"

"It's not for sale."

"What would you say to three hundred thousand dollars?"

She was, of course, very rich. To supplement the usual witch's hoard of gold, she had been making prudent investments for more than a century, more often than not with foreknowledge of the market, so that her private holdings were on the order of an oil sheikh's fortune. There was not a house in Rumford's Mill that was worth three hundred thousand dollars, least of all this crumbling relic, a fact which she knew as well as she knew that Watkins knew it.

"I can't sell it," Watkins said, miserably. "I can't."

She looked at him. "Mr. Watkins," she said, "I like its smell. I want it. I will have it. I'm afraid I'm going to have to use a little coercion. I really didn't want to start off this way. Still, you won't remember, will you?"

It is doubtful that Watkins heard her; he was a tortured man. She said, "Mr. Watkins, have you noticed my ring?" Watkins did not respond. "*Look at my ring, Mr. Watkins,*" she said. It was a gold ring with a green gem, worn on the middle finger of her right hand. Watkins looked at it. She said, "Now, Mr. Watkins, you are going to do as I tell you. Are you not?"

"Yes," Watkins said.

So it was that Meg Hathorne came to Rumford's Mill. The town was puzzled, of course. They knew she was rich (word had leaked out about the price she had paid Watkins), and it was impossible to find a reason for a rich woman choosing to live in a house like that. Some people suggested that Fred Watkins was nothing less than a super-

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salesman, who had performed the extraordinary feat of unloading this notorious white elephant on a gullible outsider, but in time it became perfectly clear that Meg Hathorne was never anything but wholly satisfied with her house, and, in any case, most of the townsfolk had known Watkins too long to believe he could be capable of such a prodigy of persuasion. He was, and always had been, a commonplace colorless man, wholly ordinary and quite incapable of extraordinary accomplishments. He had, it was true, become somewhat odd after his wife ran away, but even his eccentricities were characterless and unobtrusive.

His wife, Edna, had been even mousier than he, a drab little mate for the drab little man, and the two of them lived mild timid lives in the rundown big house that was the last remnant of the days when the Watkins family had money. If Fred and Edna were not ecstatically happy, neither were they exceptionally miserable; they were, on the whole, in their drab, mild way, content.

But miserable things began to happen. These things were the consequence of nothing less than Edna's possesion by a demon. There is no way of knowing how this tragedy came about, or why it was Edna who was chosen, or even exactly when it took place, since subsequent events demonstrated that she had been possessed for a considerable time before Watkins comprehended that she had become someone — or something — else.

He thought at first that she might be losing her mind. She had had an aunt who in mid-life took suddenly to undressing in public places and required confinement; there could have been something in the blood. He tried to watch her carefully, but most of his work was done in the evenings, and as often as not he did not return home until close to midnight. One night he came in unexpectedly early and did not find her. He looked in all the rooms of the house, and then went down into the basement. Unidentifiable noises were coming from the cavernous unfinished area that comprised a considerable portion of the cellars, and he went to the low entrance behind the enormous old furnace and entered.

She was at the far end, busy at something, working in the white glare of a gasoline lantern. He knocked against a box, and she whirled and saw him. Instantly she snatched up the lantern and ran to him. By the time she reached him she was weeping hysterically and shrieking something about a rat. He took her up and put her to bed. She would not permit him to leave her, and in the end it was he who first fell asleep, without ever having it made clear exactly what she had been at.

The next day she simply refused to talk about it. When Watkins made a different attempt to press the matter, she turned on him with intemperate rage and venom, displaying a startling fluency of invective. He crept off, as-

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tonished and cowed. It was as if a placid domestic rabbit had suddenly bared its teeth and begun to emit menacing bass growls.

He did not speak to her again about the incident, but made a serious effort to keep a close watch on her, striving diligently to be as devious and sly as possible. Such behavior was, of course, entirely foreign to his nature, and it may reasonably be supposed that she thought his clumsy subterfuges nothing more than a rather comical minor annoyance. In any case, he was given no opportunity to investigate the cellar room, because after that night she would never leave the house for any reason.

Or so Watkins thought. But one evening at dinner he decided he did not want his coffee, and rather than incur her wrath by leaving it in his cup, he found a chance to pour it into the pot of a rubber plant when her attention was engaged elsewhere. As a consequence he did not on that evening ingest the soporific drug with which she was accustomed to dosing him when she had night business to transact. He went to bed at his usual time, but did not fall asleep. When she entered and spoke to him, he did not answer, for no particular reason except that he did not feel like talking to her.

He heard her footsteps going down the stairs and then out of the house, and, in a little while, the sound of the car backing out of the garage and crunching down the driveway. He rose, dressed, lit the gasoline lantern, and descended to the basement. He went to the corner where the garden tools were kept, and selected a long-handled shovel. With the lantern in one hand and the shovel in the other, he ducked under the furnace pipes and entered the unfinished room. He went directly to the place where she had been working that night, and examined the floor. She had indeed been digging there. He put down the lantern, took up the shovel, and began to dig. In no time at all he found the first body.

Poor Watkins was quite incapable of coping with such a discovery. The shovel sank into something squashily yielding, and came up dripping unspeakably. He stood frozen for a long moment, trying to comprehend what it was that lay on his shovel, and as he stood so, the stench struck him, a vile belch of corruption that was almost palpable in its intensity. His gorge rose abruptly and violently; at the same instant he realized what it was that he held on the shovel. He screamed and ran. He ran through the opening and slammed full-tilt into the pipes of the furnace. He rebounded, fell to the floor, and scrambled frantically on all fours into the center of the furnace room, to the place where the light was brightest, and crouched under the bright bare bulb, making piteous noises.

He groveled there for some time. By degrees his moaning and retching subsided. He knelt there, trembling,

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staring at the floor. After a time he rose, squared his shoulders, and re-entered the room.

It was either an act of the most extraordinary courage or of impaired reason. Consider: this ordinary, timid little man, who often turned pale at the sight of bloody scenes on a movie screen, picked up his shovel and returned to that terrifying cavern and began to dig. And kept on digging, despite what his shovel uncovered. He dug, there in that hideous stench, as if each of the horrors he exposed was a valuable treasure that whetted his appetite to find more. Many of the bodies were those of little children, and there is no doubt at all that before he had finished he was somewhat crazy. As he dug he screamed steadily, in a choked and muted voice.

Behind him a sudden harsh fierce voice said, "Leave them alone!" He spun around. It was Edna. Instantly, without conscious thought and without the slightest hesitation, he swung the shovel with all his strength. The edge took her just under the ear; the top half of her head was sheared off.

It was very messy, of course, but far less disquieting than the rest of the contents of the room, and in any case the wretched Watkins was — temporarily at least — far beyond further shock or fear or remorse. He quite calmly set about the work of hiding all traces of both Edna's awful leavings and his own timely act of extermination. He worked coolly and efficiently, a craftsman intent upon doing a workmanlike job. His face was dead and expressionless. Out of it stared eyes that were quite mad.

In a corner he dug a large deep hole. He gathered up all the ghastly offal he had exhumed, and threw it into the hole. He took both the large and small pieces of Edna and pitched them in atop her victims. He went into the furnace room and found the body of her last victim, which she had evidently been dragging in for burial when she saw Watkins's light or heard him at his digging. It was, mercifully, the body of an adult this time, a man in his forties, nastily mutilated. It took its place in the communal hole.

He went to the bedroom and gathered together some of her clothes and toiletries (he was capable of foresight in his cold lunacy) and shoved them into a suitcase. As he was leaving the room he saw a gold crucifix that she had sometimes worn, hanging from its chain over the mirror on her dressing table. He took it with him.

The suitcase went into the hole after the bodies. He took up his shovel again and began to fill up the hole. When the fill was within a foot of the top, he remembered the crucifix. He tossed it in. When the filling was complete he brought garden tools and raked the floor of the room to a uniform smoothness. He piled upon the grave splintered wood and broken pottery from the general litter, returned the tools to their accustomed places, strip-

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ped off his clothes and bundled them for burning, took a long hot shower, and went to bed. Two days later, when he called on the chief of police, his behavior was very close to normal.

"She take anything with her? I mean, pack a bag or anything?" said the chief. His questioning had been perfunctory. His mind seemed to be on something else.

"Why — I don't know. I'll have to look," said cagey Watkins.

The chief heaved a sigh. "Fred," he said, "now Fred, what I'm going to tell you may come as a shock. But somebody's going to have to break the news to you, and it looks like I'm elected. Now Fred, it looks like Edna's run off with a man. Man named Tibbetts, salesman with Acme Manifold, out of Buffalo. Now that's what I think, Fred. You all right, Fred?"

Watkins was goggling mutely, trying to understand. At last he said, "What—? Who—?"

"I guess everybody knew it but you, Fred," the chief said. "Lots of talk. Quite a night-life lady. Down at Five Points in one bar or another, two, three nights a week lately. Different men. Last couple times it was this Tibbetts. Yesterday morning Hazel Kleeb called in from over at the Starlite Motel, said Tibbetts hadn't slept in his room for two nights. We did a little checking, found out him and Edna's been doing the joints. Fred, they've run off, that's what it looks like. I'm sorry, Fred. But I reckon it's for the best. Edna. Last person in the world. You never know, do you? Feeling better, Fred?"

Thus was Watkins delivered from the threat of prosecution and imprisonment; but — as he clearly saw when he reflected upon the matter — it was no more than a temporary deliverance. There remained, after all, a mass grave in the basement, and one of the murders had indubitably been committed by him. If the grave were discovered, the other atrocities would inevitably be attributed to him as well. He would then be tried and convicted as an inhuman monster, and probably executed. The more he pondered the situation, the more evident it became: there was nothing — *nothing* — as important as hiding the secret of the grave.

All his life Watkins had been the most ordinary of men, the commonest of the commonplace. Now the town began to notice that he was becoming odd, that he was on his way to becoming a notable eccentric. From the day of Edna's disappearance, no one but himself entered the house, and anyone venturing onto the grounds was driven off. He continued to work (if he failed to pay his taxes they would take the house), but the instant the day's work was done he was back at the house, watching. Watching.

He desperately feared burglars and vandals, malefactors who might break in and discover the secret. He wanted the house to be a stronghold, a fortress

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to hold such lurking predators at bay, but to make it so, to effect such improvements, would entail an incursion of workmen and suppliers, whose presence would be even more dangerous than that of the burglars because they would be tampering with the very fabric of the house. He felt, with every strand of his being, that the house must be untouched. No improvements. No repairs.

And the dilapidation continued, and at last a day came when he somehow found himself selling the house to Meg Hathorne.

The witch was as pleased with her acquisition as a young bride with her first home. She toured it from top to bottom, rejoicing in every one of the faults and defects that rendered it unsalable to an ordinary buyer. There was, in point of fact, no reason why she should have not dwelt in a comfortable new house with whatever shiny gadgetry she fancied; there were no special requirements in the covenant that specified particulars about a witch's habitation. But among the Devil's servants life follows art as surely as it does among ordinary beings, and the witch's conception of a fitting mode of life had been shaped by all the countless tales about her kind, just as our policemen have come to model their speech and manner after television policemen, and real cowboys ape those in the movies. She would have been uneasy without the conventional trappings, without cobwebs and shadowy corners and strange sounds in the night.

At the front of the house she maintained two rooms for receiving the occasional unavoidable visitor; these rooms were clean, well-lit, and elegantly furnished. The rest of the house, where she lived, was kept more to her liking: a creaking dark warren of webby passages and noisome chambers where the only light came from a carried candle or — in the room that served her as workroom — a single oil lamp that stood on a littered table and shed its drop of yellow light on tattered ancient books, scraps of parchment, crumbs of food, drying bits of viscera of small animals, and scurrying insects. It was in this room that she spent most of her time, sitting and scheming.

Her devotion to tradition did not extend to her dress, and — had there been anyone to observe — she would have seemed an incongruous figure in her snug jeans and blouse as she sat there in the fetid gloom. She sat in shadow, visible but dim, sitting in perfect immobility. At her feet lay a creature that looked exactly like a cat.

On the far side of the room something pale manifested itself in the darkness, an amorphous area of faint luminosity that seemed to emanate from the wall. The witch watched with interest. The luminosity eddied, darkened along the streams of the eddies, and began gradually to take on a cer-

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tain tenuous solidity and shape. In due course it resolved itself into the insubstantial and intermittently transparent figure of a woman. As the upper portion coalesced into vague visibility it became apparent that the top half of the head was missing.

"Well!" Meg Hathorne said. "Well, well. A ghost. A ghost, no less. And who might you be?"

There was a pause. Then a voice came, a hoarse, hollow, slow voice, deep but attenuated and substanceless, as of a great bellow conveyed across an enormous distance by faulty equipment. "Edna — Watkins," the voice said. "I — am — Edna — Watkins. Find — my — body. Give — me — proper — burial."

Meg Hathorne stared for a moment, and then burst out laughing. "Oh, come off it," she said. "You're not talking to a civilian now. What's your name, and how did you get trapped like this?"

When the voice came again it was considerably quicker and clearer. "If you know that much, you know I'm not going to tell you my name. Who are you?"

"Oh, I work for the same firm you do," she said. "I'm in good standing, too, which I imagine is more than you can say. It looks to me as if you're in real trouble, my friend. It's a pretty stupid move, you know, getting trapped in a body when it dies. Interesting, though. I never saw a ghost before. Never expected to see one, to tell the truth. I thought you fellows had smartened up and learned how to avoid that kind of thing. What happened?"

"The usual," the ghost said. "I was caught by surprise. Who'd have expected that little mouse of a man to be so quick with his shovel? I'd crept up behind him and said something I thought might frighten him into a heart attack, and *zip* — there I was in a dead body. What do you want?"

The question meant, "What payment will persuade you to help me?" There was, of course, no possibility that she would lend any aid for reasons of goodwill or shared interests or even to curry favor with their master. In the universe of these creatures an act of disinterested charity was the equivalent of mortal sin in a human context. She said, "Why, nothing that I can think of. Maybe I'll just keep you around for company. I don't have much opportunity for conversation about business matters. Can you make interesting conversation?"

"Conversation?" the ghost said. "Yes, we can have conversation. But there is something you will have to do first. The man threw a ... token into the grave. It is a very strong restraint. Even the effort of coming this far, of holding a form and talking to you here, causes me awful pain. If you will just remove that thing, we will be able to talk all you like."

The witch grinned. "We'll have to think about that, won't we? I know what you're up to. Right now you're

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pretty closely confined to these premises, but if I take away the restraint — what is it, a cross? — it won't be as painful for you to wander farther afield, and sooner or later you might find someone who's not too scared to listen to you and get the message about where the body's buried. And when they rebury it, you'll be free. Is that about right?"

"Of course," the ghost said. "That's always been the way. But you know as well as I do that it almost always takes a long time. Centuries or millennia. But you can hasten things for me. Just tell the authorities you found a body under your house. The rest will be routine. What do you want in exchange?"

"I said I'd have to think about it. Go back, now. Get out!" the witch said. The ghost disappeared.

For some time she sat motionless. Then she rose and viciously kicked the creature that lay at her feet. It squalled in perfect imitation of a hurt and startled cat.

"Oh, shut up!" the witch said. "I need to talk to Ashkob. Can you get him?"

"That hurt," the creature said. "It hurt quite a lot. You know I'm keeping a list, don't you? Someday.... Yes. I'll see if I can reach him."

It became as still as a china cat on a mantel. After a time it said, "What is it now, Meg? I've got more important things to do than wipe your nose for you, you know." It was speaking in a different voice, a voice not unlike the one the ghost had first used.

The witch went white with rage at the words. "You like taking chances, don't you, Ashkob?" she said in a furious cold voice. "I advise you to be careful about what you say. Any more disrespect and I'll call you up here in person and hurt you a little. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, mistress." The voice had taken on a grudgingly servile intonation.

"All right," she said. "Now listen to me. There is a colleague of yours here, bound as a ghost in this house. I want you to get me his name."

From the cat-creature's mouth came a coarse, loud laugh. "Somebody got himself trapped, did he? Haw, haw, haw. And now he's a lousy ghost. Worst existence there is. Awful. Not to speak of what'll happen to him when the chief gets hold of him again. Haw, haw, haw."

The witch grinned in spite of herself. The suffering of others was to these creatures the deepest and most satisfying of pleasures, and indeed the creation of such suffering was their profession. Their pleasure was in no way diminished by the fact that the trapped demon was one of their own. The demon Ashkob in fact found extra satisfaction in the circumstance.

Ashkob was a very minor functionary in the underworld; his occupation, that of servant and slave to mortals who had made a pact with his master,

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placed him very near the bottom of Hell's caste system. It is in such an entity that the demoniac characteristic of envy reaches its fullest flower; with almost the entire working population of Hell in position above him, he had an almost infinite number of beings to envy. Demons whose work is the possession of human beings are of a considerably higher social rank than Ashkob and his kind, and Ashkob was deeply grateful for the discomfiture of this one. "Hang on, Meg," he said. "I'll be back. Haw, haw, haw."

Time is a concept that does not apply in Hell's plane of reality, and although to Meg Hathorne no more than thirty seconds elapsed before Ashkob spoke again, he had in fact spent the equivalent of forty years in research to obtain the information she wanted, and the trace of good humor caused by the other demon's discomfiture had long since disappeared. "The name's Gnulcibber," he said, "And you'd better watch out how you use it. It's not the kind of information you're supposed to have. You overstep yourself just once and we'll have you down here in a flash." Apparently the idea cheered him a little. "And now that you've got it, what are you going to do with it? That kind is pretty tough, you know. Not like me. One slip and he'll have you." He seemed to find the thought pleasant. "Gobble you up," he said. "Haw, haw, haw."

"I know what I'm doing," the witch said. "That'll be all for you, for the time being. I'll call you if I need you."

The cat-creature relaxed suddenly, and began to wash its face in a very natural manner. Meg Hathorne took up one of the books on the table, searched for and found the page she required, and began to read aloud in a harsh, clangorous, gutteral language. The words, in translation, were: "I call thee by name, *Gnulcibber;* I adjure and command thee to appear now before me in docile mien and behavior, *Gnulcibber,* and to obey me in all things, or suffer the punishment thou knowest I can lay upon thee. Come now, *Gnulcibber!*"

Against the wall, in the spot where it had first appeared, the ghost began to take shape. Meg Hathorne said, "You don't have to do that. Show yourself."

"You are an ignorant woman," the ghost said. "It is a great misfortune that you should have this power over me. I cannot abandon this ghost-form until I am released permanently, unless a much greater power than you commands it. It is a thing you might have been thought to know, since you have this dominance. How did you learn my name?"

"Never mind about that," Meg Hathorne said. "Now listen to me. I am going to command your services for as long as I live in this house, and I would rather not have to concern myself about attention being attracted to the house or to me. I propose an agreement. If you will convenant not to try

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to expose the location of the grave for so long as I am in occupancy, I will see to it that you are released when I move on. But understand me, Gnulcibber: if I have any problems with you, I'll fix that grave so it will *never* be found. Now. Do you accept?"

"I don't have much choice, do I?" Gnulcibber said.

"All right," said Meg Hathorne. "Now the first thing I want you to do is to put the fear around the house. Not strong enough to excite any comment, just enough to keep people off the grounds. I don't want any thieves breaking in or bums sleeping under the porch or kids peeking through windows. Just lay it on strong enough so anybody uninvited will think about changing his mind by the time he reaches the boundary."

"It's done," Gnulcibber said.

There was a sudden susurration audible through the house, the rustle of a host of tiny feet, a multitude of faint squeals and chitters and buzzings. The fear had struck into the dark and secret places within the walls and floors, and out of them, deserting the house in incontinent flight, came all the little decent vermin who dwelt there, the timid gentle mice and small harmless serpents and cleanly insects. There were others who did not flee because they did not feel the fear, who went about their business as usual: the rats and carrion insects, the spiders and venomous reptiles. These were altogether at home in the house of a witch, and what had terrified the others was comforting to them.

Fred Watkins was not comforted. He was gripped by the fear, twisted and wrung by it, reduced to a lump of pure terror. He was, of course, very close to the center, the source. He was squatting at the base of an old blue spruce tree whose lowest branches, those that grew close to the ground, had been trimmed off long ago, so that the branching now began at a height of four feet or so. The branches that grew at that level were long and drooping, and their extremities brushed the ground, so that around the trunk a low, circular cavern was formed. Anyone hiding there was undetectable even in daylight, and Watkins in his boyhood had spent a considerable part of each summer under the tree, in peaceful retreat from the real world.

Now it was his nighttime observation post. Watching the house had become the center of his life, an obsession that excluded almost every other concern. He had gradually come to a conviction that it was an absolute necessity that he know instantly when the bodies were discovered. Then he would make his escape. He supposed. He had not, in fact, formed any plans. The effort seemed somehow excessive. It was simpler to have a drink and postpone the planning until another day. And it was, after all, about as much as could be expected of any man, this responsibility for keeping a house under round-the-clock observation

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(except for a few grudged hours of sleep) while at the same time suffering all the terrors of discovery and disgrace. Who could be blamed for having recourse to the bottle under the circumstances?

Alcohol had come late to Watkins's life, but it came at an opportune time, and he found it to be a welcome friend. He had money now, and no need or desire to work, and he had an obsession grounded in a deep and abiding fear. He was pleased with his discovery that doses of bourbon whiskey dulled and blurred his awareness of the calamity that lay in wait, and he dosed freely. It was, consequently, a partially anesthetized and comparatively reasonable man who crouched under the blue spruce tree and kept fanatical watch that night.

Until the fear struck; then there was no anesthesia, no barrier. There was only abject, sniveling, paralyzing terror. He sucked greedily at the bottle, swallowing until his stomach rebelled. He grimly fought down the nausea and drank again. The whiskey would help. It had to help.

In the house the witch said to the ghost, "All right, back to your hole. I'll call you when I need you."

"I must tell you," the ghost said, "that there is a—"

"Silence!" the witch shouted. "You will speak when you are spoken to, and not before. Go!"

"On you be it, then," the ghost said. "I have spoken." It disappeared.

It did not, however, return to the grave; instead, it manifested itself near Watkins's tree. At the same time, in a small area around the tree, it nullified the pall of fear.

The awful terror was lifted suddenly from Watkins, and the excessive helping of whiskey he had just taken made itself felt, so that he was able to look with a measure of calmness at the thing before him, realizing, even as he did so, that it would ineluctably return to him in nightmares. It was Edna, that was certain, Edna standing mute and pale in the moonlight, Edna with no top to her head, standing — *standing!* — with no top to her ... no top ... It was too much, even with the whiskey. He opened his mouth to scream.

The jaw of the thing moved. It said, authoritatively, "Remain silent, Watkins."

He choked back the scream. He shook his head violently. After several false starts he said, in a voice that was theatrically calm, "But you're dead, Edna."

"Of course I am," the ghost said. "I'm a ghost."

"Yes, of course," Watkins said. "You're a ghost. That's what you are. A ghost. You're—"

"Stop jabbering," the ghost said. Its jaw moved, but with a sort of mechanical regularity, the movement in no way synchronized with the words it spoke. Watkins clapped his hand over his mouth. It was the only way the babbling could be stopped. And unless

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it were stopped, it would very quickly degenerate into mindless howling. No question about that.

"Now listen, Watkins," the ghost said. "I'm going to tell you how to get your house back, so you can watch it and make sure the grave isn't discovered. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes," Watkins said. "Oh, yes. Yes."

"All right," the ghost said. "Listen hard. Understand me. Tomorrow night she'll be in a trance all night, talking with other witches. We'll have plenty of time to talk, and we won't have to fear that she'll hear us. Come after sundown. Bring some paper to write on, and a light of some kind. She'll not see it. Do you understand me? Writing material and a light. And no drink. Have you grasped this?"

"Yes, ghost," Watkins said. He lied. But he did remember it all the next day, and he thought about it, and was unable to decide whether it had been real or a hallucination. "You can have your house back," the ghost had said. If it had been real — if he had in fact seen Edna's ghost, and it had said the things he remembered — then there was really no choice. He had to try it.

And so the next evening, not long after sunset, he was back under the tree, with a pad of paper and a ballpoint and a camper's flashlight in a canvas carryall. The bottle was there, too, but unopened. The fear still lay over the premises, and it had been an act of real courage for him to force his way through it to the haven under the tree. There the ghost had thoughtfully allowed the nullification to remain in effect, and Watkins was in dread only to the degree that may be considered natural in a man who believes that he will probably very soon be confronted by a truly horrible apparition.

He was quite right; the ghost manifested itself almost immediately. It spoke in its grating monotone: "Write this down, Watkins. It is a recipe for a love charm."

"A *love charm?*"

"You will prepare it and anoint yourself with it. It will give you a certain power over the witch."

"Oh, no," Watkins said. "No, sir. No way. You think I'm going to mess around with *her?*"

"Hear me, Watkins. This is what you will do. You will anoint yourself and go openly to her. Her body is young, and your aneling will affect her strongly. She will not, you must understand, lose control of herself, and she will remain very dangerous to you. But she will be off guard, especially since she believes you to be totally harmless. Hit her on the head with a club. Once she is unconscious I will give you further instructions. I will be there."

"Hit — I can't do that. Hit somebody over the head with a club. No."

"You can and you will, if you want

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your house back," the ghost said. "Now write."

He wrote. He did want his house back. The voice grated on and on, dictating a long list of loathsome ingredients and minutely describing a complex and repulsive method of preparation. At last the ghost said, "All right, Watkins. That is all of it. Prepare it."

Watkins crept from his den and returned home and read what he had written. It was an enormously disgusting business. He concluded that he had to try it.

Thus an evening came when Watkins, neatly dressed, cold-sober, and stinking abominably of the grease he had prepared and smeared upon himself, presented himself at the front door of the house and rang the bell. He waited for a few minutes, and, when the door did not open, turned away with a feeling of great relief. She wasn't at home. He'd have to come back another day.

Behind him the door opened. "Why, it's Mr. Watkins," Meg Hathorne said. "What do you want, Mr. Watkins?" Her voice was not friendly.

Watkins whirled to face her. "I—need—to—talk—to—you," he said.

"Indeed," she said. "What about, I wonder. Well, come in, Mr. Watkins."

Watkins entered. As she closed the door she caught a whiff of his unguent. An expression of interest came into her face. She said, "Now, Mr. Watkins, what do you want?" Her voice had softened considerably.

"I—have—something—to—show—you," said Watkins, reeling off another memorized line.

"Why don't you come back to my study?" she said. "We can talk better there." She led Watkins along the filthy corridor, brushing aside cobwebs in grotesque mimicry of a fussy housewife. As she entered the doorway of her den, Watkins struck.

His club was an eighteen-inch length of baseball bat, and his arm was strengthened by sheer terror; the club met her head with a decisive crunch. She fell instantly, seeming to collapse vertically upon herself, like a dropped empty sack. Watkins stood with the club in his hand, not moving, totally incapable of even attempting to think what his next step should be, and suddenly the ghost, in all its transcendent nastiness, was there beside him.

"Good, Watkins, good!" it said. "Drag her in here. Lay her out. Put the crucifix on her chest. Quickly, now."

"Crucifix?" Watkins could manage no more than a whisper. "What crucifix?"

"The one I told you to bring."

"You didn't tell me to bring a crucifix."

"You slime, of course I told you to — you are right. I did not. I have already too long been a ghost. I no longer think properly. But we must have a crucifix. The one in the grave. You must get it. Quickly!"

There remained in Watkins no

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capacity for protest or remonstrance; he obediently hurried through the once-familiar house to the basement and took up the shovel. He dug and probed and groped until his hand encountered the cross. He pulled it out and ascended the stairs and returned to the witch's den.

She lay as she had fallen, a slack, loose heap. Watkins said, "Is she dead?"

"Oh, no," said the ghost. "No. You can be sure you will know it when she is dead. You have been a very long time getting that thing. Luckily you struck hard. Now drag her in. Good. Stretch her out on her back. Lay the crucifix on her."

Watkins did so. The cat-creature was watching with interest.

As the crucifix touched her, the witch's body gave a convulsive twitch, and then lay as motionless as before, but now with a cadaverous rigidity. There was an expectant silence in the room. And then there was a Presence.

A glistening black wall, extending from floor to ceiling and from side wall to side wall, appeared at the end of the room. It shimmered with an indefinable internal movement. Whiteness appeared suddenly at the corners where it met the ceiling and floor, and the whiteness expanded rapidly until what had been the black wall could be seen as a swiftly contracting circle of blackness, with white all around it. Then the whiteness, too, was a circle, and at the top of the white circle a monstrous eyelid shrank into recognizability. The vast pitiless eye filled the entire end of the room, and then no longer filled it because it was shrinking with enormous speed and there were two eyes, and then a face that Watkins could never afterward remember, although neither was he ever able to forget the dread that he felt. There was a whole head in a moment, and a neck and shoulders, and as the figure shrank it flowed and altered, changing in shape and color, discarding indescribable appendages and acquiring scaly excretions that writhed and shifted and became a semblance of clothing, so that by the time it had shrunk to the size of a man, it looked like a man.

A very ordinary man, at that, a grayish man in grayish clothing, who spoke in a grayish voice: "Now, what's the problem here?"

The ghost said, "Your Excellency. I appeal to you. The witch is spoiled, as you can see. Take her, and release me."

The gray man said, "Well, well. So it's you, Gnulcibber. You've let yourself in for a bit of trouble this time, haven't you? And who's this?"

The cat-creature said, "Sir, it's a common mortal. An innocent bystander, as it were. Watkins. Could be of use to you."

The gray man looked at Watkins. "Perhaps so," he said. "We'll see. First I'd better take care of Meg here. Wake up, Meg."

The witch's eyes opened. There

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was instant comprehension in them. She said, "*You*, Watkins. Don't gloat yet. I'll be seeing you sooner than you think."

"Now, now," the gray man said. "No recriminations. You've had as long as most, Meg, and the time has come to pay the piper. Come along, now."

The witch's clothing was suddenly empty, although it retained her contours for a moment before collapsing. Out of it flashed a swift small black thing, no larger than a mosquito, that emitted a tiny, thin, high wail. The gray man's hand darted out, and his thumb and forefinger plucked the thing from the air and stowed it in what appeared to be a vest pocket. "So much for her," the gray man said. "Now you, Gnulcibber."

"My punishment should not be too harsh, Excellency," the ghost said. "It is true that I was careless. But I was not the first that it has happened to, nor will I be the last. It is a hazard of the profession."

A shaft of fire jetted from the gray man's hand, bathing the ghost in flames. It screamed.

"Don't play the fool with *me*, Gnulcibber," the gray man said. "Your chief offense wasn't getting trapped, as you well know. It was ruining a good tool. Witches aren't easily come by these days. Do you think I don't know how you used the mortal there to destroy the witch? You'll have to pay for that. You'll pay very dearly. And at the same time, I think I can put you to some use." He turned to Watkins. "Tell me, Mr. Watkins, what is it that you want in this world?"

Watkins made several false starts before his voice responded. He said at last, "Are you—? Are you—?"

"Oh, no," the gray man said. "Far from it. I am an assistant to an assistant of his, I suppose you would call it. Not without authority, however. Considerable authority, as a matter of fact. Enough to settle this matter without consulting elsewhere. I ask you again, Watkins: What is it that you want?"

The voice was oily and soothing, and Watkins was sufficiently calmed by its emolliating softness to begin to think again, albeit in a somewhat fitful and disorganized way. "No deals," he said. "No deals with you. I've heard about — I know about—"

"Oh, come now, Watkins," the gray man said. "I am not suggesting a contract. After what you have just witnessed, I am sure it would be quite useless to do that. No, what I propose is an uncomplicated short-term agreement. You do something for me, and I will do something for you, and that will be the end of it. Simple barter of services."

"Well — what is it you want me to do?"

"Nothing of much consequence, really, for you, although it will be of ponderable service to me, for which I propose to be more than generous in

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my return to you. Therefore, Watkins, you should carefully consider what your real heart's desire may be. What is it really that you want most? Permit your mind to wander freely. I assure you, I have considerable latitude in the favors I can grant."

Watkins was making a valiant effort to think clearly, but with no marked success. "I don't — there's nothing I want, really. I'd just like not to worry, not to feel so scared all the time. I'd like things to be the way they used to be. There's nothing you could give me."

"What is it that worries you, that frightens you, Watkins?"

"That's none of your—" He remembered whom he was talking to. "The house," he said. "Somebody else in the house. Somebody finding — finding—"

"There's nothing to worry about," the gray man said. "The house is yours. You can move right back in. Look here."

He plucked something from the air and handed it to Watkins. "A deed to the house," he said, "all properly signed and notarized. A forgery, of course, but I promise you that under the circumstances no one will ever know. And something comes with it. She buried her hoard in the basement. There is no way I can give you access to her bank accounts and securities without arousing more interest than you would find comfortable, but there is gold and currency down there to the amount of, say, a million and a half. It will be adequate."

Watkins had not really heard the last sentences; he was trying to grasp the first, to bring himself to believe that the long nightmare might be ending, that his life might go back again to what it had been before Meg Hathorne took his house. He did not allow his hopes to go beyond that. He said, "It's mine again? I can live here again? And watch out for it?"

"Oh, yes indeed. You are quite welcome to go back to your hermit's life here, if that is what you want. It will in fact fit in very well with the service I propose to ask of you. You see, Watkins, what I need is someone to act as master to Gnulcibber here. I have just sentenced him to a few centuries as a ghost, to soften him up for the real punishment that will follow. And while just being a ghost is itself a wretched and painful existence, it can become truly awful if there's someone about to keep the ghost hopping, to keep him from ever taking his ease in the grave. So, Watkins, you will get your house back, but you will have to take the ghost with it. What do you say?"

Take the ghost with it. Watkins looked at the wraith with revulsion. It seemed, as it stood before the gray man, to be as solid and substantial as Watkins himself, an erect body with no top to its head and its arms hanging limp at its sides. It was clad in a torn, muddy dress that hung askew on its

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body and hose that flopped loose about its ankles. One foot was shod, the other not. The shod foot twisted at an unnatural angle. When it was motionless, it was simply the simulacrum of a corpse, nothing more; a gruesome and disgusting sight, but bearable. But when it moved, when it spoke, then it was truly horrible: its muddy limbs erratic and stiff, like ineptly operated machinery; its voice an inhuman harsh croak; its jaw chomping mechanically, like a ventriloquist's dummy. And inside it, Watkins knew, was something immeasurably evil and malign, a thing coldly venomous and bloated with hate and beslimed with unspeakable filth. He said, "No. No. I can't do it. I couldn't — there's no way I could live with that thing in the house."

"It *is* pretty nasty," the gray man said. "It's mostly a matter of appearance, though. Consider me. Now that you have somewhat recovered from your initial panic, do you find my presence disquieting?"

Watkins discovered that he did not; or, at any rate, not to the point of panic. He said, "No, I guess not."

"No. And yet, I assure you, Watkins, that what I really am is, in every single particular, so much worse than this poor clown of a ghost that there is hardly a basis for comparison. Beside me he is a cherub, a loveable puppy dog. I know that you have sensed in this Gnulcibber certain attitudes and capabilities that terrorize you, but you are able to sense them only because he cannot dissemble as well as I. As he terrorizes you, Watkins, so do I terrorize him. And yet you are — up to a point — comfortable with me. To you, I look and behave like an ordinary man; I converse with you reasonably, I emanate no reek of wickedness. And so shall it be with our friend, Gnulcibber. Watch."

He waved his hand. "There, Watkins," he said. "Do you think you could live with *that* in the house?"

Instead of Edna's disfigured corpse, a young woman was standing there, a ripe beauty of classical proportions and aphrodisiac skin tones, who wore nothing but a small smile of tender invitation. She extended her arms toward Watkins.

He tried frantically to order his thoughts. "It — that thing is still Gnulcibber, whatever it looks like. I tell you, it scares me."

"To be sure," the gray man said, "but that is easily taken care of. Watch and listen, Watkins." He spoke to the ghost: "This is your master, for as long as the present phase of your punishment lasts. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Excellency," the ghost said. The voice was soft, pleasant, and seductive.

The gray man continued: "His power over you is absolute. If you displease him in any way, he has only to say a word to punish you most horribly. You can do nothing to harm him, or even to cause him discomfort or inconvenience. You are incapable of

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plotting or trickery against him. You will keep your real self buried so deeply that no trace or sense of you will be evident to Watkins or any other mortal with whom you may come in contact. You will retain sufficient power to be of aid and assistance to Watkins, but no more power than that. You may not return to the body in the grave for rest and relief. You will travel as far from these premises as Watkins commands you, and you are forbidden to voice any complaint about the sufferings it will cause you. All these commands I lay upon you. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Excellency," the soft voice said.

"All right, Watkins," said the gray man, "let's see how you like your new servant. Go ahead. Touch her. That's real flesh, there, not ghost-stuff. What you've got here is real woman, except that there's no soul inside. What's inside is Gnulcibber, but I promise you you'll forget about that in a week or two. Go ahead. Grab a handful."

Watkins touched her, somewhat gingerly, on the upper arm: soft, firm female flesh. She smiled at him, meltingly. He stared at her for a moment, and then turned back to the gray man. "No," he said, "I don't think this is what I want. I guess what I really want is Edna back and the old life without any excitement. Could you — that is, could you—?"

The gray man shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Edna is dead, Watkins, and there is nothing I can do about that. Edna has escaped us entirely. But if she is what you want, you can have a perfect substitute. Look!"

And, instead of the hourri, Edna was there: mousy, dowdy, and dear, her face wearing its accustomed apologetic half-smile.

"Edna," Watkins said. "Oh, Edna."

"Fred," she said. "Oh, it's good to be back."

The gray man said, "Now, Watkins. Do we have a bargain?"

The word "bargain" alerted Watkins, and alarmed him. "Bargain?" he said. "Tell me again. What will our bargain be?"

"As I said, a simple exchange of services. I give you your house and this substitute Edna, and an absolute assurance that the secret in the basement will remain a secret for as long as that is your desire. In exchange you will keep the substitute Edna with you and about you busy at household and other tasks. I suggest that you travel, even go abroad. That will provide excellent — oh, excellent — punishment for Gnulcibber. I suppose you will not in the event do that; I realize that you are somewhat insane in matters relating to this house, and you will probably not be able to bring yourself to leave it for very long. But that will be all right. Simply being Edna for twenty-four hours a day will inflict most grievous punishment upon this oaf."

Watkins said, "But my — well, my soul. I won't bargain that. I'm not making a deal on that. That's final."

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"Oh, there's nothing like that involved," the gray man said. "The fact is, it requires a rather elaborate ceremony to effect that sort of contract. What we have here is just a temporary ad hoc matter. We can, of course, arrange an extension, if at some future date you conclude that the various benefits and pleasures you will enjoy under this arrangement should be continued beyond your normal span of years. At that time, if you reached such a conclusion, there must, of course, be a renegotiation, and quite obviously there will be weightier matters under consideration than we have bargained for today. At that time we can discuss the matter of your soul."

"That time will never come," Watkins said.

"Of course not," the gray man said.

You have no doubt sometimes seen buttoned-up, sinister-looking houses on decaying small-town streets, and wondered who lived there, and what might go on behind the locked shutters. Most of these houses, as it happens, shelter nothing more than pitiable daft recluses; but one out of fifty or so is the lair of a witch. In Rumford's Mill, on Donley Street, there is such a house. It is difficult to say which of the classifications applies to its owner. Fred Watkins is certainly reclusive enough, and eccentric to a marked degree, and he is probably just what he seems to be, an odd old man who dislikes the society of people. His house has become truly ruinous, but he remains adamant in his refusal to undertake that slightest maintenance of it, despite the fact that he is, as everyone in town knows, very rich.

He is also very old, although no one is sure just how old. His contemporaries are all dead now, and there are some unaccountable hiatuses in the vital statistics books in the courthouse. He is unusually well preserved for a man of his years, and this is sometimes commented upon by the few citizens who occasionally catch sight of him.

His wife is seen even less often than he is, but she also is reported to carry her years well. A vague story is sometimes brought up when the Watkinses are discussed, something half-remembered from conversations of the parents of the parties to the discussion, about how Mrs. Watkins had been a wild one when she was young, and once ran off with a traveling salesman, but he abandoned her or something, and she came home to Watkins.

They are, in any case, quiet, unobtrusive people, and important taxpayers (Watkins, over the years, bought up all the land within a half-mile of his house), and no one would dream of disturbing them, least of all the city fathers. They are peculiar old folks, but they live their peculiar lives very quietly, disturbing no one and making every effort to ensure that no one disturbs them. They are said to be very fond of their cat.

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Books

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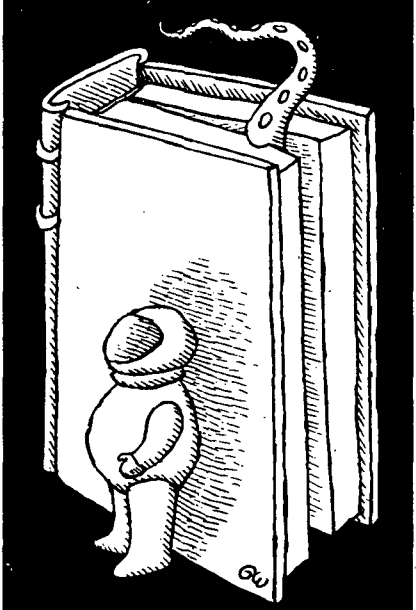

Twilight World, Poul Anderson, Tor, $2.75

Orion Shall Rise, Poul Anderson, Timescape, $16.95 hardcover, $8.95 trade paperback

Lyonesse, Jack Vance, Berkley trade paperback, $6.95

It was 1947 when Poul Anderson first appeared. That was in *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine, with "Tomorrow's Children," a novella about mutants emerging in the days following World War III.

As such, the story fell directly into ASF's post-War preoccupation with Atomic Doom. That preoccupation was strong enough so that almost all of us, I think, would have been astonished if given convincing proof that as of 1983 the world still turned pretty much as before. Most of us figured on 1965 or so as an outside date.* In 1961, when Anderson published *Twilight World* — a "novel" anfractuously expanding "Tomorrow's Children" and some added magazine stories — things looked no less likely for a rapidly forthcoming termination to humankind's ambitions.

In a way, we may even have an explanation for why some people, perhaps including Anderson and even Anderson's best editor, John W. Campbell Jr., seemed to never generate quite as

**Incidentally, that happens to be the year of doom in Herbert Best's 1940* The Twenty Fifth Hour, *a novel I persist in mis-attributing to George Allan England.*

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much elan, during this period, as one might have expected. It's possible — well, it's at least tenable — that any long-term career objective seemed irrelevant.

And of course that may still be true. But Anderson, unlike Campbell, has now advanced 36 years into the future since 1947 and has not yet seen doom. That weight of ... disappointment? ... must have some effect on a speculative, creative mind. I wonder what the effect might be. And it's interesting, in that light, to contemplate the coincidence of Tor's re-issuing *Twilight World* simultaneously with Timescape's bringing out Anderson's latest novel, *Orion Shall Rise*.

Orion Shall Rise is about the society that has arisen some centuries after atomic World War III, and that society's obsession with the possibility of World War IV.

There are many threads in parallel with those of *Twilight World*. Society is fragmented, feudal in some respects, with daily lives subject to various natural maltreatments including abrupt termination in duels, assassinations, raids, limited wars, and not getting out of the Duke's way. But just as the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has not produced any significant crop of mutations — excepting leukemias and some perhaps even subtler failures of the organism to reproduce its substance accurately — there is no plethora of two-headed babies and short-legged calves in *Orion Shall Rise*.

Twilight World, on the other hand, is essentially a superman-adventure story, good enough to provide an evening's diversion and little more. The new Anderson look into a likely(?) future goes considerably deeper than that.

Just how much deeper, and whether consistently deeper, are questions we shall try to answer. First, though, here's another recent SF writer re-raising the possibility that atomic doom has not passed us by. First there was Robert Heinlein's *Friday*, and then Dean Ing's *Pulling Through*, and now Anderson. You say Ing may not fit this category? Ing, between his more famous two colleagues, appears to be as solidly Libertarian as they are. It's interesting to me that while the first wave of doomcriers was led by Chan Davis, then very much a radical of the left, the present renascence comes at the hands of right-radical speculators. Somehow, that makes it all the more convincing. Just what do these people feel coming down their pipelines? And should we be running around pricing surge tanks?

Well, whatever. I tend to think that the big war won't come until after I've made my last mortgage payment, damn it, which gives us all quite a margin; still, it can do no harm to look at scenarios of Anderson's quality.

In *Twilight World*, things are pretty straightforward, once we get past the muties. There are portions of the world never entered or spoken of,

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there are petty barons, and there are the seats of learning where reasonable men try to recreate or preserve the pre-War culture reasonably. Making due allowance for the fact that the milk is spilt and, furthermore, the ewer is shattered.

In *Orion Shall Rise*, it's foregone that the past can never be recaptured. And although there are vestiges of neo-medievalism, particularly in the Ilduciel culture, the world is as divided into intercontinental power blocs, albeit differently constituted ones, as ours is. So it makes sense that the focus of the book's political plot-lines is a paranoid concern with preserving that status quo or at worst in shifting the balance of power but not disturbing the essential matrix.

I say, "paranoid." At first, I said "nearly paranoid," because it is no more senseless and narrowly channeled than is our concern in our day for making sure we come out on top or, as we tend to put it, deservedly stay on top. Then, for that same reason, I struck out the qualifier. It's exactly as sad, infuriating, and probably doomed, as our own pre-War chauvinisms; as blindly and precipitously crazy.

What this meant to this reader was that at first I had trouble accepting the reality of the struggle between the Maurai Federation and the Norrmen, and now I have the conviction that the fault is largely my own and only a little bit Anderson's. What remains his is the blame attachable for doing the most natural thing in the world; apparently quoting earlier Anderson milieux, which we can't be fully blamed for greeting with a sense of overfamiliarity. How many Anderson stories have we all read, after all, about the essentially Polynesian culture and the essentially Norse culture, and the essentially Franco-Britannic chivalric culture?

So it's a while before it dawns on one that, yes, the culture based on New Zealand has many superficial similarities to previous Anderson characterizations in sarongs, but that it has some remarkably different qualities which one might ascribe to its genesis not only in Polynesia but also in the Protestant ethic and probably in strong Korean or Japanese influxes. The 'Norrmen' come from the Pacific Northwest, not the Atlantic, and a prime-moving moiety within their culture is the Wolf Lodge, for all that they seem to be heavily based on Yank and Canuck attributes. And the Ilduciel culture — but we'll get to that.

The principal struggle is between the Maurai, who have already struck down Norrman ambitions once in this generation, and the Norrmen, who have come to rally their underground resistence around the promise that 'Orion shall rise!' The Norrmen, sited as they are within the North Temperate and Arctic climatic zones, badly need nuclear energy, to which the rest of the world responds with horror and, in the case of the Maurai, acting as self-

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appointed policemen to the world, with instant suppression.

Involved willy-nilly in these affairs are the Mong, a Slavic-speaking culture based in most of the territory once claimed by the United States of America, in which a substrate of villagers supports armies of horsemen. Gradually aging down from the ferocity of earlier generations, the Mong still hold the balance of power in North America, in the sense that the Norrmen cannot turn their backs on them in order to concentrate on thwarting the Maurai. That is, they can't as long as politics proceeds with merely conventional weapons as the last resort.

So, as other portions of the world gradually assimilate the fact that the Norrmen are salvaging old nuclear warheads, tension mounts.

Anderson does an excellent job of telling his story by rotating a large cast of characters across the stage. The Maurai are represented in large part by Terai Lohannaso, whom we follow through many years of his life, as sailor and as diplomat. But a significant part is played by Wairoa, the pied man; a product of genetic engineering, not of radiation.

On the Norrman side, there is no exact counterpart. That weight is made up by Launy Birken, the younger Terai's friendly and respected foe, and by Launy's daughter Ronica, whose various adventures over the years, solo and in the company of the devious Mikli Karst, give us most of our view of their culture. Vanna Uangovna Kim, the wise and dutiful librarian, is the one who affords us our grasp of the plains-living Mong.

The Ilduciel, or Skyholm, milieu is shown us through Talence Iern Ferlay, his wife, Ashcroft Faylis Mayne, and the megalomaniacal Talence Jovain Aurillac. Iern is the logical heir to the captaincy, in his world the symbolic as well as the real ascended status. Skyholm — like Prometheus in Ray Nelson's novel — is a geodesic structure supported at high altitiude by solar heating of its "airbag."* The only surviving such structure, it, and its laser cannon — nominally deployed only to modify weather — have dominated the sightlines and minds of all the inhabitants of southern France ever since the end of the War. Serving exactly the same political and military strategies as are always represented by properly sited fortresses, it has been both a focus of stability and a vastly conservative influence, promulgating elaborate social codes and social aspirations to match them.

In the end, all these characters, and more, work out the world's future not logically, nor emotionally, but — as has always happened before — in a

**The actual physics and engineering are somewhat more complex, but the principles are elementary. If Nelson is to be believed, this is a Buckminster Fuller design. What intrigues me is that John Campbell is posthumously once again proven right about the commonplace frequency of SF ideas.*

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quasiaccidental resultant of the eternal conflict between human head and human heart.

Much of this sounds like the Anderson of old, but, as earlier noted, there are differences. It's been obvious ever since *The Avatar*, one of SF's most ambitious recent failures, that Anderson is stirring around; that what has contented him for over a quarter of a century is abruptly not enough to do.

I think the effort is paying off. Whereas *The Avatar* was too cumbersome to be entertaining, *Orion Shall Rise*, despite its large central cast and its need to convey so many invented cultures — so many subtly invented cultures — moves forward almost as fast and as smoothly as Anderson might like, and smoothly and fast enough. I don't think there's any surprise to what Ronica Birken is doing, nor to what Orion might be; it has been, after all, quite a few years since Cyril Kornbluth's *Not This August*, even if Anderson hadn't planted so many internal clues in his own text. I think Plik the Minstrel is a superfluous character, and I'm not totally convinced by Mikli Karst's characterization. But all of those comments are just barely more than nitpicking.

What we have — in the *Twilight World/Orion Shall Rise* coincidence — is a rare opportunity to assess the creative development in one of SF's steadiest, most able practitioners. And, incidentally, in *Orion Shall Rise* we have what's sure to be one of the strongest novels of the year. It's also encouraging to see that even someone who has been so thoroughly the master of his craft, and needed to do no more, has taken the risks to his reputation and reaped the rewards to his scope.

Another writer with a territory securely staked out is, of course, Jack Vance, the span of whose career almost exactly coincides with that of his friend Anderson. Ever since *The Dying Earth*, a 1950 Hillman paperback original which became legendary almost as soon as Hillman Periodicals killed it, *Worlds Beyond* magazine, and the trusting optimism of editor Damon Knight, Vance has been a figure of awe and mystery.

He does not socialize on the convention circuit, he does not appear to regard the writing of SF as a holy cause, and he has not, in truth, learned any more about commercial plot-crafting than he knew back in the days when he first appeared among the ragged pages of various Standard magazines. And that's a fact; almost any one of us could readily show him why his stories would appear much more professional if he but paid as much attention to pacing and climax as is done by colleagues half his age with but a tenth of his narrative power and his ability to construct a riveting characterization. Thank God, Vance has never listened to that sort of advice.

Why am I so grateful? Because as long as Jack Vance continues to write,

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there will be things about the spell-binding of readers that are beyond quantification. I prefer it to be that way, and so should you.

In *Lyonesse*, the first volume in what will clearly be a series about the lands beyond the sunset, Vance's strengths are impressively utilized, and for many readers his weaknesses will hardly be relevant.

Let's talk about "weaknesses" for a moment. Using that sort of terminology implies that there is one ideal way to tell stories, and that the accomplishments of a given writer can be gauged by the degree to which that person's various subordinate skills — prose composition, characterization, plotting, dialogue construction, et cetera — variously attain or fall short of the levels required to maintain that ideal. Well, back in the days when everything was written to pulp fiction standards,* that might have been a useable analytic construct. But it's much subtler than that.

In the case of Poul Anderson, for instance, we have a first-rate creative mind which, in turning to a career in SF writing, found its groove with impressive skill and elan. At a time in his career chronology when most writers are just contemplating their first novelette, Anderson was already enough well thought-of to be given the difficult, demanding assignment of supplying lead novellas on time and to length, and the editorial record of *Planet Stories* shines rather more brightly because of the work then done by "A.A. Craig." That may not impress you. That's only because you've never tried to do it. More to the point, it's convincing evidence that Anderson was motivated from his beginnings to discover what readers would thrill to, that could be written by Poul Anderson. And for over a quarter of a century, that was what he did; what he did damned well, and what, for consistency and productivity, stands as SF's major career of its kind.

Then, with books like *The Avatar*, he began to move away from the accustomed usages of those thirty-odd years, baffling and disappointing some readers — and probably, at least in the beginning of this evolution, gaining few new ones. Is that a "weakness"? In terms of the "old" Poul Anderson, yes, it is a failure to deliver the mixture as before. In terms of the Poul Anderson who actually is, and has more inside him, some of which may well be of intense interest to SF readers, it emphatically is not, and I cite *Orion Shall Rise* as evidence of a transition toward another sort of excellence.

In the case of Jack Vance, we have

**There never was such a day, there never was such a thing as one "pulp fiction," the standards of fiction have always varied from medium to medium and genre to genre and sometimes from issue to issue, and the famous "hack" of folklore always has been vanishingly rare, but never mind; if we don't simplify these matters, we'll be here all day in the hot sun.*

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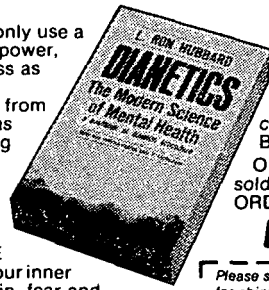

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someone who for thirty years and more has not learned a thing about what most other writers study assiduously. This can only be because he doesn't care, and a legion of Vance fans stands ready to declare that if this be a shortcoming, the shorter the better. I'm one of that number. What Vance has, to a degree few other writers of our time even approach, is a sure grasp of what in stories is important to him. This is different from a grasp of what experts say is important to readers. It is different not only in kind but in the required quality of faith in one's self. In all the time since I read "The World Thinker," Vance's first published SF story, I have never seen that faith waver, and I venture to say no one else has, either. It is a compliment to the man and his muse, both.

Lyonesse, like all Vance stories, is first of all textured by myriad felicitous details. We begin with a brief history of what we might call The Blessed Isles, somewhere off beyond the Bay of Biscay or possibly now sunken in it, and then we proceed to the court of King Casmir, ambitious, nervous, and hopeful of political advantage when his little daughter, Suldrun, is grown enough to fob off into wedlock with the heir to some other of the nearby kingdoms.

Suldrun is one of the most felicitous creations of high fantasy that I've seen in many a year. We follow her from childhood to and through adolescence,

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possessed of that rare true innocence which allows her to almost unconsciously evade the schemes of her father, her irredeemably egotistical mother, and of a pettifogging priest. She is subdued and unassailable, intelligent beyond shrewdness, and virtuous in a way that makes more than a marriage of her eventual liason with the castaway Prince Aillas. Then she gives birth to a son, Dhrun, and, separated both from the child and Aillas, hangs herself.

The child is raised to young manhood by fairies. Aillas, victim of political betrayals in his own right, devotes most of the rest of the book to searching for Dhrun. Dhrun, forced at last into the world of mortals, has his own adventures to pursue. And pursue them they do, while, like figures in a tapestry behind them, Casmir and the other monarchs of his generation work out a historical overturning influenced by contending wizards and their homunculi.

None of this synopsis conveys either Vance's language or the depth and taste of his eye for incident and narrative filigree. In truth, it doesn't convey more than the broadest strokes of this intricately interwoven tale. But we can be sure of two things at least; one, that this is a major work of high fantasy, and, two, that like Suldrun, snatched away from us when there was so much more we wanted her to have, some of those threads will never be tucked in "properly."

How do I mean that? I don't mean that Suldrun is so richly realized that I miss her for her own sake, although in fact I do miss her. I mean in terms of things like "balance" and "pacing," we are told so much about Suldrun in the first third of the book that all our accustomed senses of what's right in fiction tell us that she's bound to be a strong, continuing character right through to the end. Certainly we learn a great deal more about her than we do about some other characters who clearly(?) *will* continue well into the next volumes, and we learn a great deal about her that is itself of great narrative interest, only to realize — perhaps correctly, but certainly convincingly — that we'll now never know how *those* things resolved.

So some of you — some of us — are going to be both intrigued and piqued by *Lyonesse*. But I'll tell you something else. Ever since last year, there's been a Philip K. Dick Memorial Award, for the year's best American paperback original, and what we've just discussed here is a very strong contender for that award now.

Next time we're going to run through a whole bunch of those.

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Terry Brykczynski ("Right of Passage," March 1981) returns with a short and surprising tale about the appraisal of an antique satellite.

Doubles

BY

TERRY BRYKCZYNSKI

"Yes, but is it genuine?"

Jake shrugged. Any idiot could see the satellite was vintage, very superior old integrated electronics. The patina was right; no backroom knockoff artist, no matter how talented, could duplicate that finish, dulled and irregularly pitted by years of meteorite dust. It was the finish that gave the fakes away.

"We've had problems with ... ah, reproductions before." The appraiser for Sotheby, Parke, Bernet and Yemani sucked air through his expensively gilded teeth and gazed almost disdainfully into the crate. "Not much to look at, is it?" He sighed and tamped some Syrian latakia into his pipe, sneering even as he lit it. "There's the question of a customs declaration, of course."

Jake shook his head. "Not for pre-Treaty orbitals." He went slowly, as if explaining to an idiot. "This is a vintage American optical reconnaissance item, in mint condition, and the damn finest one I've seen in thirty years in the business."

"Perhaps. I'll have a word with our legal department. What collection did it come from?"

"No collection. This was picked out of space three weeks ago."

The man's eyes flickered just enough for Jake to know he had him piqued. Still, there was no point in telling him where he really got it until the time was right. A little white lie would be enough to test Sotheby Yemani's interest. "I bought it from a runner who works the geo-pharm fields. The mechanics are always picking up junk floating around — Krupliers, lunch buckets, Campbell's pouches — and selling them for drinks. Every once in a while I come across a goody."

"This is more than a goody."

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"Damn right. A foreman on one of the far swing runs saw it on his radar," Jake lied. "He scooted over and mag-towed it back to base. He thought it was a mudded-up Prospecan Junior because of the solar panels and sold it for soybeans."

"Too bad. He could have been a rich man."

"And Sotheby Yemani would be out a commission," Jake pointed out.

"True." The wimpy appraiser sucked some more on his pipe, staring a little less reluctantly into the crate, and finally coughed out an offer. "It's passable. I'll recommend it for our optical instruments auction next spring. Photographic lots are going very well these days. It should fetch a good price. Would you care to pay for an illustration in the catalog? It wouldn't cost much but—"

"No."

"Very well, then," he sniffed. "I'll have the description written by our camera department. I can't, however guarantee their enthusiasm."

"No." Jake shook his head more emphatically. It was now or never with this self-important clerk. He didn't mind so-called experts who didn't know anything, as long as they admitted it occasionally. This one was a schmuck. "I don't want it in the optic auction."

"But where else would it go? It's too late a piece for classic satellites. And it wouldn't fetch more than a million or two at most in our decorator sale. It's a glorified camera, for Allah's sake. You wouldn't exactly call it art, would you?"

"No."

"Then where would *you* put it?"

Go for it, Jake swore to himself. He took a breath and stared coldly into the appraiser's eyes. Then he shoved a finger in his chest. "Historically Significant National Treasures."

The appraiser smiled. He had heard this one tried before, usually from little old ladies clutching serviettes autographed by second-rate colonial emperors or faded parchment biogen patents to some obscure single-cell mineral accumulator. He always smiled and showed them out the door with a suggestion they take their priceless treasures to Christie's and Golombek down the street. But he certainly had no politeness to waste on professional dealers who should know better than to waste his time.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, flicking his hand to get rid of the Styrofoam packing balls. They clung to his fingers with a static charge and he tried to shake them off. "It's a moderately interesting satellite, and some telecom company will be happy to hang it in their lobby for a publigim, but it's just an optical recon like hundreds of others. Scarce, but not rare. Good shape, yes, but hardly what one could call ... unique. No, I'm afraid if this is all you have to show me—"

"I have a provenance."

At the word the appraiser froze. "You do?"

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"I can prove," Jake said, kicking at the crate, "where this satellite's been."

"I'm a little pressed for time. If you could explain?"

"I will. To your National Treasure department head. Bring him down."

"I'm afraid he's much too busy for matters of this sort. If it's of any importance I will personally bring it to his attention."

"Suit yourself," Jake grunted. He picked up a hammer and started nailing up the crate, whistling a mindless sopordrone from last year's Broadway hit. "Maybe Christie's and Golombek won't mind a good commission."

The veep was down in five minutes.

"Yes, yes?" The veep for National Treasures brushed aside the obsequious apologies of the walk-in appraiser and instead glanced at Jake with a nod of slight recognition. "You brought in a lizzie several years ago, didn't you?"

"Yes," Jake said, pleased at the memory. He had made the find in a stinking barn in New Hampshire and lived off the profit for several years. It had all been nickel and dime ephemera since then, and he was hungry for another score.

"A stainless steel DeLorean, wasn't it?" The veep smiled himself at the memory. "We put it in our American Entrepreneur Sale and it stole the show. Wish we had some more, that barnum was the best publigim we had all season."

"I'm still looking," Jake mumbled.

"Well? What have you got for us today?" Without waiting for an answer, the veep pried open the last two loosely nailed boards and peered eagerly inside. After a few minutes on his back poking inside the satellite with a flashlight, he stood up and accepted a handkerchief from the appraiser to wipe off his hands. "Well, well."

"Just an optical recon, sir," the appraiser hastened to explain. Then, a little less confidently, "Isn't it?"

"Not just any recon, Parria," the veep chortled. "This — this is a Wong."

"A Wong, sir?"

"Yes, you idiot. Didn't you see the signature?"

The appraiser scrambled on his knees and stared where the veep pointed. In a dark corner under the backup transponder the flashlight caught the dull stamping of the designing engineer's name.

"A signed Wong," the veep repeated, the awe choking his throat. "The best engineer CalTact ever produced. This is from his finest period. We must have it for our major Arms and Armor sale." He turned to Jake. "Where did you get this? And don't give me some nonsense about picking through the geo-pharm outspace dump; I've heard that one before."

"I'll tell you the truth," Jake said.

"That would be a good beginning."

There was no use lying now, Jake

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considered; an optical recon from an outspace dump would be yawned at. This man *knew* recons. It was provenance that was important, and this time Jake had it. He unlocked his briefcase and showed them the pickup coordinates, verified by independent sporan readings. A daytripper lindblad full of geegawkers heading for the remains of the Surrogate Battlefield had picked it up on the edge, thinking it was a piece of leftover battlestar from the Great War. Even luckier, it was uncontaminated and they could sell it to a collector and pay for their trip if customs didn't confiscate it. Following a rumor, Jake had paid them handsomely — far more than it was worth, he assured them — and waved the suckers good-bye. He knew it was a Wong the second he saw it. But even more incredibly, once he had the satellite on his desk and began the research, he found the all-important provenance.

"This is the interpolated orbit," Jake continued, displaying the printout. "It puts the recon after launch fifty years ago right here — within punchup range of the Balkan Alliance battlestar *Gropius*. October 1, 2015."

At the date they visibly shrank and gulped, staring nervously at the recon. As every schoolboy knew, everything in the Surrogate Battlefield had been turned to particle beam soup on October 5.

"If it were hot," Jake grinned, "you can bet your ass I wouldn't be standing here looking at it with you."

"But if it isn't radioactive," the veep pointed out, "it couldn't have come from the Surrogate Battlefield. Unless..."

"Unless," Jake agreed. The veep was a real expert. He understood.

The infamous *Gropius*. The despised flagship of the Balkan fleet, brought down in a daring commando raid after incontrovertible proof was raised in congressional emergency session that it had outrageously violated treaty limitations on the number of beam turrets allowed for orbiting defensive postures. If the president had wanted a better provocation, he couldn't have found a more blatant challenge than the *Gropius*, and if the world had wanted speedier realignment, it couldn't have started a nastier war than the Great One. Historians argued over the fiasco for years, long after the bitter boundaries had been redrawn and the bodies buried, the accounts adjusted, and the widows compensated. The Great One was still played in movie houses and taught in lead miniatures at the War College; it still led the parade of VFW floats every year on Dependence Day.

"Here is the provenance," Jake whispered. He took the flashlight from the veep and bent down, pointing the beam at the shutter mechanism. The gray paper-thin diaphragm still slid easily and the lens was still crystal clear. He engaged the manual test sequence with his fingertip, and they listened to the shutter fire.

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CLICK.

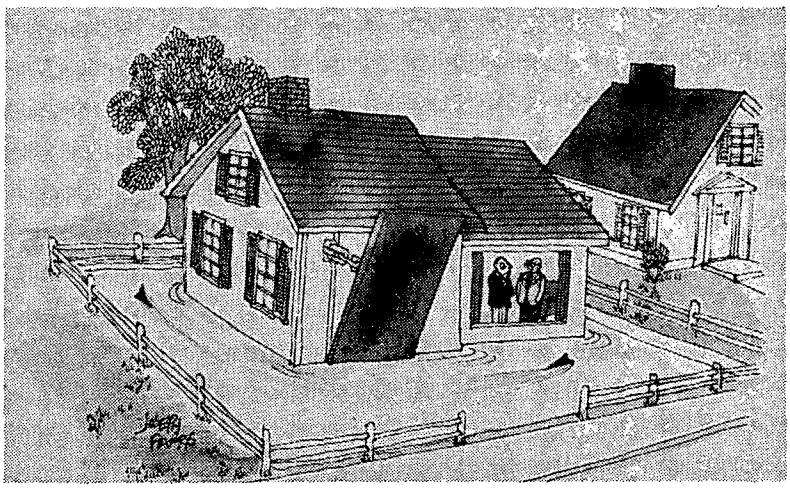
The optical reconnaissance satellite — even a Wong — was nothing more than a glorified camera. With the entire sky humming and throbbing on each frequency of the electromagnetic spectrum, intelligence gathering for all its sophistication still depended on solid evidence impervious to jamming or eavesdropping. Radio waves were about as secure as wash on a clothesline, no matter how much coding you applied. The oprecons were the sleek falcons of the spy agencies — winging up to their targets, snapping pictures, elipsing back to Earth and ejecting their all-important film packs to be snatched by military turbo-retrievers in the atmosphere. The pictures were the true gen — the impossible to fake matrix of silver chloride and bromide and gelatin proving without a shadow of a doubt—

CLICK.

Jake smiled grimly as the veep and the appraiser jumped out of their boots. Their faces turned pale and their fingers shook as they pointed at the Wong.

"Oh my Allah," the veep gasped sickly.

Jake nodded and flicked off the flashlight, feeling the same horror as when he had first discovered the defective shutter. Two million people had fried, a half continent and three trading cartels liquidated — all because a lousy camera took a double exposure.



"We got tired of being broken into."

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Mike Connor wrote "Stillborn," (March 1982) and "The Corsican Box," (December 1982). His latest is a suspenseful story about a young girl and an escapee from a State Hospital and the strange connection that brings them to a deadly confrontation.

Below the Camel Barns

BY
MIKE CONNER

I

Saturday dinner was burgers and shakes around a single lamp on the living room rug. But it was a family dinner, and thus more or less a happy one for Dana Ramsey. The anxiety and confusion of buying the new house and moving from San Francisco was almost over. *Like pulling a tooth,* she thought, as she watched her twelve-year-old daughter Jessica steal french fries from her father, Ken Ramsey. Most of the pain had come from anticipation.

The next morning they started unpacking boxes. Jessica was anxious to get her room into shape, but it turned out her things were at the very bottom of the pile in the garage.

"Why don't you ride your bike, hon? Explore the neighborhood."

"Maybe later," she said, grabbing her jump rope. "Please ask Daddy to dig my stuff out. A bare room's no fun, you know."

Dana gave her a hug. "All those echoes."

"Just ask him, O.K., Mom?" Then she ran outside.

"Ask him what?" Ken Ramsey was trying to shove the blade of a balky tape measure back into its case.

"Nothing much. Just furniture and clothing."

"What?" He looked up at his wife.

"Nothing. Just a joke. Jess is a bit pouty, that's all."

"Oh. Look, I've got to get another tape for this thing. Need anything from the hardware?"

"Two more rolls of that sticky-backed shelf paper'd be nice. Oh, and a box of TSP."

"O.K. I'll be back." He walked outside with his car keys dangling from his mouth.

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"Ken?"

"Yes?"

Dana was about to say how glad she was to have him home, helping with things for a change. But the move had been Ken's idea. He *had* to be here.

"Never mind," she said. "Just hurry back."

Dana went to the kitchen after that to unpack some pots and pans. A little later, Jessica rushed in with a short, fine-boned girl with big, serious-brown eyes.

"Mom! This is Corey Madeira. She lives three houses down. Corey, meet Mom."

Corey shook hands with her gravely. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Mrs. Ramsey. Welcome to Benicia."

"Well! Thank you very much."

"Can I ride bikes with her, Mom? She wants to show me around."

"I'll be sure to watch her, Mrs. Ramsey. It's really very safe where we're going."

"And where's that?"

"St. Dominic's. The cemetery up the hill. There's no cars. Well, maybe some, but they never speed. It's not right to drive fast in a cemetery."

Dana laughed. "O.K. But check back in a while, Jessica. As soon as your father comes back from the store, I'm having him take your things to your room."

"I'll make sure of it, Mrs. Ramsey. Nice meeting you."

Well, well, well, Dana thought, suppressing a smile as the girls left. Isn't *she* the grown-up one!

Corey and Jessica rode along Hillcrest Avenue, and then through the wrought iron gates guarding the old Catholic cemetery, where rows of china white markers scaled the gentle rise in the middle of the plot. They followed the drive over this until they reached the rear fence, bordering an even older road that twisted off into a summer-parched valley. A few miles off, on the mud flats of Suisun Bay, gas flared from the towers of an oil refinery.

Corey pointed out an alabaster column topped by a weathered Virgin. "There's my great-grandparents. And one set of grandparents. I suppose they'll plant me here, too, sooner or later."

"What's down in that valley?" Jessica asked quickly.

"That's the old Benicia Arsenal. The army used to keep bombs and shells in those bunkers. The whole valley's dug out, practically. Want to go down there?"

"I don't know. Mom said not to go too far."

Corey nodded. Then, "Well, I know something neat that isn't far at all." She walked her bike across the grass to the corner of the iron fence where there was a gate whose latch was secured by a twisted wire. When Jessica was through, Corey closed it again.

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"There's a jump at the bottom of this path," she warned. "Think you can handle it?"

"You kidding? I'm from San Francisco, remember?" Jessica lined her bike along the trail, settled against her seat, pushed off. The ramp at the bottom was tougher than she expected. It knocked her a little off balance as she flew through the air, and though she landed O.K., she wasn't able to brake fast enough to avoid a fall. Jessica went one way, her bike went another, and her head struck something hard as she tumbled to a sprawling stop in the weeds. Corey was there in an instant.

"Holy cow! Are you all right?"

Jessica winced as she sat up. "Ooh! I think I took it a little too fast. Where'd my bike go?"

"Over there."

"Help me up. I'm fine." As it turned out, the bike was unharmed, and Jessica insisted on going on to the place Corey had wanted to show her. Her dizziness began to fade when, in the hollow at the end of a crumbling road, Corey stopped in front of three old sandstone buildings. The outer pair were identical two story structures with pitched corrugated roofs and arched ground-level doorways that were covered with whitewashed plywood. The building in the middle, also of sandstone, was so low that its eaves almost touched the ground. Jessica could see wavy chisel marks on the big sandstone blocks.

"What do you think these were?" Corey asked.

"Camel barns."

Her face fell. "How did you know?"

"That sign there." Jessica giggled.

"The army bought camels to use in Utah during the 1850s. But the cavalrymen didn't like 'em — too ornery, too weird to ride. They were shipped here to be auctioned off in 1864. This lot was their pen."

"Wow." Jessica tried to imagine camels sticking their long necks through the arched stall doors. How would it be to ride one through these hills?

"Who uses the buildings now?"

"That one's a wallpaper factory. The other one's a warehouse for one of the companies in the industrial park." Corey got back on her bike. "Come on, I'll show you where the army used to store gunpowder."

She heard Jessica make a choking noise, turned in time to see her collapse. Jessica began to thrash her arms and legs and make more noises, noises Corey had never heard another child make before. Horrible as it was, Corey didn't hesitate; she threw down her bike and went to hold Jessica, trying to talk to her, make her wake up. After a minute that seemed longer than an hour, the spasms stopped. She sighed deeply, relaxed, and seemed to be asleep. Wide-eyed, Corey tore off her windbreaker and stuffed it gently beneath her friend's head. Then she looked around for a way to bring help without having to leave Jessica alone.

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What she found was a big rock, which she threw through the window of the wallpaper factory to trip the buglar alarm.

2

At that moment, 250 miles south of Benicia, sunlight spilled through the narrow windows of conference room C-3 at Santa Maria State Hospital. The glare made it hard for Rex Stabler to see the faces of all fifteen psychiatrists, social workers, psychologists, and psychiatric technicians who were meeting to consider his request for early release. Rex Stabler had been classified by the court system as MDSO — mentally disordered sex offender — after his conviction on a rape and attempted murder of a Moduc County woman five years before. Now he was making his first appearance before the evaluation board, which had the power to release him into the community, to keep him at Santa Maria, or to transfer him to state prison to serve the remainder of his eight-year term.

Rex, wearing a clean white T-shirt and freshly pressed khakis, his fine red hair neatly combed away from his handsome face, was doing well. He'd explained how the hospital had helped him change. He could handle his violence now because he knew the danger signals. All he wanted out of his life was to support and protect his wife and young son, who'd been conceived during a conjugal visit two years ago. Although he could never completely make up for what he'd done, he felt that this, at least, would be a start.

Sitting directly across from Rex Stabler was Thomas Ruiz, the psychiatric tech in charge of Rex's treatment program. He liked Rex. Also, he was impressed with Rex's performance so far. For a long time, Rex had been contemptuous of all authority at the hospital.

"Let's talk about that anger a moment, Rex," Ruiz said, leafing through Rex's thick case file. "You testified at your trial that you'd been angry with Miss Kent because you felt she overcharged your wife for groceries. That anger translated into rape. What about that? You say you can control your anger, but there'll be times on the outside when you'll become very angry. What then? How can we be sure you won't translate that anger again?"

Rex folded his hands together and smiled inwardly. He'd been expecting that question, and had the answer they wanted to hear all prepared. Shapiro, the psychiatrist from Santa Barbara, and Caroline Braun, the social worker, were the only two really negative votes on this board, but Rex was sure he would sway them with this answer.

The smell hit him first: a combination of hay and wet hair and manure and rotting grain that was like cinnamon-laced ammonia. Rex hesitated. Then he felt the knots gathering in his stomach, moving up along his spine until they rammed into the back of his head. If he'd been anywhere except this

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conference room, he would have screamed. As it was, he bit the inside of his cheek and tasted blood and did not care.

He hadn't felt a hit like this since Sherry Kent.

Ruiz frowned. "Are you all right, Rex?" It took every ounce of willpower from a man who did 450 push-ups every day for Rex to answer.

"Sorry ... must be a touch of the flu or something. What was the question again?"

"I think we've heard enough, Mr. Stabler," Shapiro said, through a haze of pipe smoke. "We'll let you know as soon as we come to a decision."

"No!" Anger broke through the pain. "The man asked me a question—"

"Rex—" Ruiz reached for him, but Rex knocked his hand away.

"All I want to do is answer the goddamn question! You don't want that, do you, asshole!"

"Rex! That's enough!" Ruiz signaled for some orderlies as Rex yelled at Shapiro, and at Caroline Braun. Only when he was being clamped from behind did Rex seem to realize what he had done. Relaxing, he mumbled an apology and then allowed himself to be taken meekly from the conference room.

Shapiro leaned back in his chair and tapped his pencil on the table. "Just what the hell was that all about, Tom?"

"Nerves, maybe." He sighed. "He was fine...."

The committee discussion lasted barely one half hour, and Caroline Braun clinched it with the simple question: "Would you like to live next door to Rex Stabler?"

The vote was 11-4 for retention in Santa Maria.

Packy Albers was the kind of man you looked at twice if you saw him walking down your street: six feet three inches, 135 pounds and sometimes less, he had huge tawny-colored eyes and kept his jet black hair loaded with Brylcreem. In and out of Santa Maria, Packy always wore a blue hooded sweatshirt zipped to the neck, hood up.

Packy looked scary, but he was not a sex offender, and he was more or less harmless, at least to human beings. What got him committed was his loathing of cats. In the years before his mother had finally signed the papers, Packy had killed just about every stray cat in his hometown of Rio Vista. And he'd taken his mother's car and driven all the way west to Antioch and Pittsburg for more. Packy lived to dispatch them in different ways: set them on fire, or hang them, or tie them in a neat bundle and pour lye or paint remover on top of them. He knew it was wrong, but he hated cats, and anyway, there was little chance of his killing every cat in the world. Packy just rounded up the strays. His mother let him get away with it for years, until she got fed up and scared that he might move up to

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bigger prey, like kids. Packy knew he'd never do that. He knew murderers in Santa Maria, men who'd done horrible things. He was sure these men would go straight to hell when they died.

Hardly anyone in Santa Maria would have anything to do with Packy. His "crimes" were too picayune to impress the real wackos, and most of the MDSO's thought he was weird. But Rex Stabler had taken a liking to him right away. Rex had his own problems, but he could see how lonely and miserable — and vulnerable — Packy was, and decided to take him under his wing. Rex made sure Packy got something to eat every day. And with his massive physique (Rex spent at least two hours working out in the weight room every day), Rex made sure that nobody in C ward dumped on Packy too much. Packy, in return, idolized his protector, and ran all sorts of errands and did whatever favors Rex asked. He even gave Rex his medication, so Rex could sell the pills to other inmates for candy and cigarette money.

A few hours after Rex had been hauled from conference room C-3, Packy finished his work shift in the kitchen and came to Rex's room. He was excited, and worried, hoping that Rex's interview had gone well and, at the same time, afraid of what Santa Maria would be like without Rex.

Rex's room was spartan, with a narrow bed, a wood chair, and a built-in desk, where Rex kept a picture of his wife and son next to his small television set. Underneath were some barbells, and a beltlike brass device called an armbuster, that Rex used to do arm curls in the weight room. Rex was smoking thoughtfully on the bed, and didn't seem to notice Packy until Packy spoke up.

"Ha-how'd it go, Ra-rex? They gonna, ah, let you out?"

"Sit down, Pack," Rex said, with such seriousness that Packy's eyes got very big. Packy sat down in the desk chair.

"Packy, do you remember what I told you about how I got in trouble with the law?"

"Wa-with the lady in Cedarville?"

"That's right."

"Sa-something inside your ha-ha-ha-ha—"

"My head. That's right, Pack. I thought all that was all over, but it's not. It happened again today. While I was in with the discharge unit."

"Somebody here?" Packy suddenly felt very scared.

"Not here. Somewhere north."

Packy stood. "Aw, Rex, you don't want no more trouble. They're gonna let you out of here, and you can go home to your wa-wa-wife and la-little boy. You don't want no trouble!"

"They won't give my a release, Packy. Shapiro and Braun torpedoed me." He blew smoke slowly from his mouth. "No, you and I are going to

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have to leave Santa Maria without their permission."

"But I da-don't wanna leave!"

"You don't want to be here without me, do you?"

Packy looked at his shoes.

"Packy, you know I'd never ask you to do wrong unless I had a damn good reason. This is life or death, Pack! There's a *thing* out there, living in someone else's brain, that's trying to strangle me, take what's mine! How can I be with Mary and Owen when it's eating into me every second? I can't. That's why I'm heading north. That's why I need your help. Now come on, what do you say?"

Packy looked at the picture of Rex's wife and son. Then he looked at Rex and knew that if he didn't help, Rex would leave Santa Maria without him. He wiped his nose with the sleeve of his sweatshirt.

Then he told Rex he'd help.

3

Ken and Dana Ramsey sat drinking coffee in the emergency room of Children's Hospital in San Francisco. They'd taken Jessica to Children's, even though their new home was forty-five minutes away, because Jess did not seem to be in any immediate danger, and because Jessica's pediatrician, Natalie Cyril, had wanted to see her. It was now almost nine; Dr. Cyril had taken Jess away in a wheelchair two hours ago.

Ken Ramsey crushed his styrofoam cup and tossed it into an ashtray. "This is ridiculous. The kid fainted. Kids faint all the time!"

"Ken, it's just a precaution, I'm sure." Dana watched him shake his head and thought about all the times Ken had blown up when it came to taking their daughter to the doctor. It wasn't a money thing — they had insurance — but something more to do with Ken's inability to accept defects. Remembering that, Dana hoped to God that there was nothing truly wrong with her daughter now.

Then Dr. Cyril came into the waiting room. She smiled warmly at Dana.

"How is she?"

"Just fine. Aside from bumps and scrapes. I've had her admitted, and she's sound asleep."

Ken came over quickly. "Admitted? Why?"

"Two reasons. The first is that you just moved, and according to Jessica, she doesn't have a bed to sleep in yet at home. And second, I have her on medication now — Dilantin — and it will be much easier to keep an eye on her here before we run tests tomorrow."

"You said she was fine. Why the medication?"

"Your daughter has had a seizure, Ken. Now, I've spoken on the phone with Jessica's friend."

"Corey."

Dr. Cyril smiled. "Yes, and she's precious! And she gave me an excellent

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account of what did happen to Jessica when she collapsed. It's very possible she's had a grand mal seizure."

"Grand mal? You don't mean epilepsy!" Dana was stunned.

"We can't say for sure until we do some blood work, and an EEG, and maybe a brain scan. It could be something as simple as low blood sugar, or a calcium deficiency. The Dilantin's a precaution, nothing more. We don't want a recurrence if we can prevent it." She put her hand on Dana's shoulder. "Right now, the best thing you can do is go back home and get Jessica's room ready. And try not to worry."

"Can I be with her tomorrow for the tests?"

"Call the office first thing and I'll let you know. Otherwise, the most important thing is not to worry. That goes for you, too, Ken."

She glanced at him coolly, then turned and disappeared through the swinging doors to the ward.

They drove silently for a time on the Easternshore Freeway. Across the bay, the lights on the Golden Gate Bridge stretched like amber pearls between the dark headlands guarding the sea. Ken carefully unwrapped a stick of gum before he spoke.

"I can't make it to the hospital tomorrow. I've got presentations to go over, then lunch with a media buyer."

"It's O.K."

He folded the foil one-handed into a triangle. "Honey? I'm thinking that maybe we ought to find a doctor who's closer."

"No."

"We'll need a second opinion on this thing. And anyway, what if there'd been a real emergency today? Cyril's just too far away."

"This is not the time to change doctors, Ken."

Ken's jawline stood out as he chewed. "Didn't you see the way she looked at me? Look, Dana, I'm sorry, but I just don't feel comfortable with her."

Dana said nothing.

"I'm serious. You know, she even had the gall to ask if I ever hit Jessica on the head!"

"That's standard procedure. She's not accusing you of anything."

"Yeah? That damned woman's never liked me and you know it!"

"It's not her job to like you: Her job is taking care of Jessica when she's sick! Natalie's a wonderful doctor."

"I want somebody else."

"Why are you doing this, Ken? Does it make you happy?"

"No, it doesn't make me happy, but she made a snap call, and I don't think it's right. Jessie's no epileptic."

"And what if she is! Is that the end of the world? This isn't the Middle Ages, Ken! A child with epilepsy can lead a happy, normal life."

"I pay the bills in this family, Dana! That means I have the right to decide who takes care of my kid!"

Dana spoke calmly. "You listen to me, Ken. I am going back to that hos-

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pital tomorrow, and I am going to allow Natalie to make whatever tests she feels are necessary. And then we will follow whatever orders she gives, and you'll keep you mouth shut, or I'll take Jess to my sister's and you can have the house you slaved so hard for all to yourself!"

"Damn it, I'm her father!"

"Then start acting like it. Worry about *her!*"

Ken's hands tightened on the wheel. He'd backed himself into a corner on this one, and he knew enough to cut his losses. Better wait until Dana was thinking clearly — and Jessica was home — before he solved the problem of Dr. Natalie Cyril once and for all.

He cracked his window and spit the gum he's been chewing out onto the freeway.

4

Rex Stabler lay on his bed with his eyes wide open and his clothes on. He was waiting for another hit — that second contact with his old enemy that would give him a good fix on her location. So far, all he knew was that it had something to do with animals (cows? elk?), and some old, sand-colored buildings. And there was water nearby, salt water. Rex could still feel the tang of it on the tip of his tongue. It was not an easy taste to forget.

He also listened as the techs on the night shift made their rounds. Whenever they entered C-ward, pneumatic closing arms hissed until the heavy doors banged shut with a loud finishing click that echoed down the linoleum and concrete hallway. Security procedure stated that a tech entering or leaving the ward must physically pull the door shut behind him to ensure that the latches had engaged. But techs were creatures of habit, and Rex knew that it was too much trouble to do that on four sets of doors thirty-two times a shift. What the techs *did* do was listen for the sound of the door closing behind them. If they didn't hear the clicks at the exact right moment, they'd stop and turn to make sure the ward was properly locked down.

Everyone in the ward knew that door sound; countless nights had drummed it into their subconscious while they slept.

So Rex lay on his bed and listened, and waited. Then, a little after three, Packy Albers slipped into his room. His face looked dead white inside his sweatshirt, and the dark blue pea jacket he wore over it. Rex smiled.

"Who's on tonight, Pack?"

"Ra-ronnie, and Montoy-oy-a. And Feecher. I he-heard 'em say tha-they were taking somebody in tonight."

That meant the transfer of a newly admitted inmate who'd just come off a week's observation in the forensic ward.

"When?" Rex asked.

"Ra-right now." Packy was proud of himself. "Tha-that's why I come."

"O.K. Who's left on the ward?"

"Feecher."

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Rex nodded. He didn't like Feecher, not since the time two years back when the tech had turned Rex in for smoking weed in his room. Sometimes there *was* justice in this world.

"Well, then," Rex said, pulling a black watch cap over his head. "Let's wait for Mr. Feecher. Take your shoes off, Packy."

They didn't have long to wait. The doors at the end of C ward opened. *Hiss. Boom-click.* Feecher sauntered through slowly, whistling, not bothering to look into many of the rooms. Things were slow on the graveyard shift; Feecher hadn't had any action for months. He put his key into the lock and pushed the door open.

Hiss. One extra beat. *Boom-click.*

Feecher had almost turned when Rex cooled him with a length of maple table leg he'd taken from the wood shop. They leaned him gently against the vestibule wall between the inner and outer sets of doors. Then they used his keys to get into one of the corridors that connected the wards. The elevator down to the receiving dock was wide open. Half a minute later, Rex and Packy were outside, running across the baseball field toward the fence. They got over it without mishap, then cut through some ranchland, heading northwest, until they hit Templeton, the nearest town along U.S. 101. There Rex used some of the money he's been saving to buy them both breakfast at Bob's Big Boy. Nobody looked twice at them, and by dawn, they'd hitched a ride with a camperback pickup loaded with duck hunting gear and a big, friendly sheepdog who kept licking Packy in the mouth. Rex was glad about that. Fighting the dog off kept Packy from getting too depressed.

"That was a nice piece of work," Rex said as they passed King City.

"Wa-wasn't right."

"We'll go all the way to Frisco, see the sights. Ever ride a cable car, Pack?"

"Na-no, and I don't wa-want to, either!"

Rex laughed. "When the time comes, you'll get on that car." The sheepdog made another lunge, knocking Packy against a pile of sleeping bags. He pushed the dog away indignantly, and then looked Rex in the eye — something he seldom had nerve enough to do.

"How come you think I'll do what you say?"

"We're friends, aren't we? I'd do the same for you if you were the guy in trouble."

Packy thought about this. Then: "Maybe I ca-can't understand wa-what makes people act like they do. But Ra-Rex, I don't think ya-you are in trouble."

"You think I'm making it up."

"I-I-I didn't sa-say tha-tha-tha—"

"Hey, Packy, relax! I'm not mad. In fact, I'm glad you said it, because honest to God, sometimes I just don't know myself. I don't want it to happen. It just does." He fell silent.

"But tha-that's what I mean, Rex!

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Wa-wa-wa-what's *it*?"

"Something very old. It lives inside a person the way a snake lives underneath a rock, resting, waiting. All of a sudden...." he shuddered. "All of a sudden, it gets the urge to grow, to move on. So *it* strikes. That's what happened Sunday. It went from me to the girl. Don't ask how it knows who to go to, or why. It just hits. And when that happens, we're tied together. We know what's inside. We know that we've got to fight."

"But why?"

"Because it'll make us fight! It's the way, Pack. It makes us fight until the one with the stronger will wins. After that, it's tired, it burrows in, sleeps, waits. Until it's hungry for another fight." Rex shook his head. "I won it from Sherry Kent, and I'm sorry as hell about whoever it is we're going after now. But I can't help myself. You're just damn lucky it's never come after you, Pack." He scratched the sheepdog's ears.

"Ra-Rex?"

"Yeah, Packy?"

"I'm sa-sorry. I'll tra-try to believe."

Rex grinned and punched at his shoulder. "More than most men get. Thanks one hell of a lot!"

5

"We can see some spiking in this trace from the left temporal lobe." Natalie Cyril pointed with a pen to Jessica's EEG. "That's what we often see in children suffering either from psychomotor seizures, or what we call secondary grand mal — that is, attacks that have their cause in a defect of the brain's architecture."

"What do you mean by psychomotor seizures?" Dana asked.

"It's an episode of dissociated behavior. Think of it as a kind of deep, involuntary daydreaming. The child may have lost all contact with her environment, even though technically, she hasn't lost consciousness. Sometimes the child even engages in purposeful, though bizarre, behavior. Like trying to open a window in a wall that doesn't have one, for instance." She smiled kindly. "Look, Dana, the important thing is, her brain scans are negative, and so is all the blood work. There's no evidence of lead poisoning, or meningitis, or mineral deficiency. And there's nothing in her medical history to indicate any previous episodes."

Dana stared at the graph paper in front of her. "What are you telling me, then?"

"The tests can't necessarily prove a diagnosis of epilepsy. EEG's for instance, only really cover about 60 percent of brain activity. In most cases where epilepsy is diagnosed, the patient history is the determining factor. What I'm saying is, we can't dismiss epilepsy. But we don't rule it in, either. For now, we'll keep up with the Dilantin. She may have a reaction — swelling gums and so forth, so watch that,

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and if she does, we'll switch to a different medication. Now she has to have it every day to keep a level in the bloodstream. Don't slack off just because she seems fine."

"What about activity? Should I keep her inside?"

"No. She should go to school, play with her new friends. Nothing too strenuous for the first few days — she'll be a bit groggy until she gets used to the medication. Just make sure she doesn't wander alone anywhere. It's possible, especially before the Dilantin builds up a level in her body, that she could have another seizure. If she does, we'll need to get her to a hospital right away."

Dana nodded, and watched Dr. Cyril write something on a pad.

"I'm also ... giving you the name of a good pediatrics man I know in your area."

"I don't want it!"

The doctor smiled. "I'm not in the habit of giving my favorite patients away, Dana. But in the event of another episode, we may not want to drive Jessica all the way here. Now! If you'll come on up to the ward with me, I think we'll find a young lady who's just itching to get her new room into shape!

That afternoon, for the first time, the new house was filled with the aroma of food — fried chicken, Jessica's favorite. She was in her room, the one that looked out on the clump of yucca growing off the corner of the patio. Jessica was busy folding underwear and putting it into the top drawer of her dresser when her mother knocked on her door.

"Honey? Corey's here to see you."

Jessica wasn't sure she wanted to see Corey. She still felt embarrassed about how she'd gone bananas at the camel barns. But she knew it would probably make her mother feel better if she did see Corey, so she said O.K.

Corey came in with a tawny Siamese cat, who wore a red harness and a leash. "This is Purr-ple," she said. "Purr-ple, meet Jessica."

Purr-ple made a noise like a quacking duck. "We've been trying to teach her to meow," Corey said, wrinkling her nose. "But she doesn't want to."

Jessica shook his paw. "Hi, Purr-ple."

"He likes to snoop around." Corey unclipped the leash and looked at Jessica. "Are you O.K. now?"

"The medicine makes me a little dizzy. But I think I'm O.K."

"What did they do to you in the hospital?"

"Tests. They stuck wires on my head." Jessica lifted up her hair to show a shaved patch where the technician had stuck an electrode for her EEG. "Gross, huh?"

"It'll grow back. So. Do they know what happened to you?"

"They're still trying to decide. Dr. Cyril wouldn't say much. She just kept smiling and telling me not to worry.

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You know how doctors are."

"Yeah. Wanna go out? I mean, if you can."

"Sure." Jessica opened the sliding door to the patio. Purr-ple followed them out, quacking.

"Purr can jump rope."

"Sure he can."

"Really. Here, I'll show you." Corey took a jump rope from her pocket and gave an end to Jessica. The Siamese lifted her head and sniffed expectantly.

"She's cross-eyed!"

"Siamese cats are *supposed* to be cross-eyed. Jump rope, Purr. Come on, show Auntie Jess—" They swung the rope around and sure enough, Purr-ple hopped forward just in time. Then she walked away with her tail in the air. Jessica giggled.

"That's not much of a trick, Corey."

"It's a pretty *good* trick for a cat." She tied her end of the jump rope to the awning post. "Twirl for me? I can do some fancy stuff. Do you know 'Spanish Dancers'?"

"Yup." Jessica swung the rope and started the old rhyme:

Late last night and the night before
Twenty-four robbers came knocking
at my door.
While I ran out,
They ran in.
This is what they said:
"Spanish Dancers do the splits
"Spanish Dancers do the high *kicks*
"Spanish Dancers turn around
"Spanish Dancers *get* out of town...."

Corey was in the middle of her twirl when Jessica dropped the rope. "Hey! I was just getting warmed up!"

Purr-ple quacked.

"Jessie?" Jessica stared straight ahead, wide-eyed, face slack. Oh God! Corey thought, please don't have another fit! But Jessica just stared. Hesitantly, Corey plucked at her friend's sleeve.

"Jessica? Are you O.K.?"

Jessica's mouth opened. "Wa-we can't sleep on tha-this bee-bee-beach, it's ta-too ca-ca-ca-cold...."

"What?" Corey was just about to get Mrs. Ramsey when Jessica blinked and looked around.

"Oh, Corey," she said, sounding drowsy and relieved.

"Are you O.K.? I thought you were having another attack."

"I guess I was daydreaming." Jessica shook her head. "It must be those pills."

"You said something about sleeping on a beach."

"I did?"

"We better tell your mom."

"No!"

"Jess—"

"I said, no! She's got enough to worry about as it is. I told you, I'm zonked from the pills. Promise me you won't say anything."

Corey's eyes flashed.

"Promise, Corey!"

"O.K. This time. But I think you're crazy." She went down to angrily click on Purr-ple's leash. Just then the kitchen door slid open and Dana Ramsey stepped out.

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"Jessie, your father just called. He won't be able to make it for dinner, so why don't you wash up? Would you like to stay, Corey? There's plenty of chicken."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Ramsey." Corey shot Jessica a look. "Maybe some other time. I'll let myself out the gate." She gathered up her cat and walked off.

"Is she mad about something, hon?"

"No. Why can't Daddy come home?"

"He had to take his new clients out to dinner." She brushed Jessica's hair and added, quickly, "You feeling all right, baby?"

Jessica slapped at her mother's hand. "Is this how it's going to be? The hospital every time I sneeze?"

"Of course not, darling—"

"Then leave me alone!" Stunned, Dana started after her daughter. But Jessica slammed the door shut.

That evening, Dana ate dinner alone.

6

They stayed that night at the Ocean Beach Motel, right across from the San Francisco Zoo. Packy liked the motel. The corridors and locked doors reminded him of Santa Maria. Rex finished a set of push-ups and lay on the bed, breathing harder than he should have.

He hadn't told Packy yet about the second hit. They'd been in a dark, stinking tunnel underneath the Great Highway, on their way out to the beach when the fist slammed his brain. Rex had smelled fried chicken. Then came strong visuals: a clump of spiky leaves, and a view over a wooden boat of a body of water, a bay or strait bounded by hills that were just starting to turn green from the first winter rains. Spanning that water was a cantilevered bridge that Rex did not recognize.

Rex lit a cigarette, smoked thoughtfully awhile, then said, "Give me that paper and pencil, Pack."

"Sha-sure." Packy watched Rex try to sketch something, frown, rip off the sheet and try again. "Hey Ra-rex? I'm ga-gettin' awful ha-ha-hungry. Let's go da-down to that ra-rib joint."

"In a minute." Rex shaded parts of his drawing with the side of the pencil lead. Finally he stopped, closed his eyes a moment, then looked at the message pad again. He stubbed out the cigarette and gave the sketch to Packy.

"You ever see this bridge before?"

Packy squinted, the way he always did when he thought hard. "It's close," Rex told him. "But north of here." Packy stared for a long time. At last he smiled.

"Wa-when I was a ka-kid, my uncle ya-used to take us on his ba-ba-boat up the Sacramento Ra-river to Ma-martinez. This is la-like the br-idge at the end. Um ... the Carquinez Bridge!"

"There's a town on the north side

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of that bridge. What's it called?"

"Benicia. Yeah, Ra-rex, it's called Benicia!"

"How far?"

"Tha-thirty, forty miles."

Rex smiled. "Pack, my man, you've made me very glad I brought you along. Let's go get something to eat. We've got a big day ahead of us tomorrow."

Packy did not want to think about that. "Ca-can I have some ra-ra-ra-ra—"

"All the ribs you can eat. Me, I feel like tearing into a mess of fried chicken. Come on!"

Dana Ramsey, thinking her daughter had fallen asleep, tried to read on a floor pillow in the middle of the piled-up boxes in the living room. Meanwhile, behind her closed door, Jessica lay awake and tried not to be afraid.

She knew that very soon, she'd have to fight. The man whose mind she'd felt for the first time on Sunday, out by the camel barns, was on his way, the thing between them twisting shorter, pulling them closer and closer. It wanted them to fight, and there was no denying its will.

The thing in Jessica's head showed her what had happened to Sherri Kent. Sherri was a widow in Cedarville with a store that had canned goods on shelves, and fishing lures stuck by their hooks on display cards, and a freezer in front of the counter loaded with Popsicles and bait and bags of rock-hard hamburger. Sherri was a local character, a hard drinker who had a way with men. Men were nothing but children to her; Sherri called men she liked "pet."

The thing lived inside Sherri Kent and slept.

It slept until Rex Stabler and his new wife moved across the border from Idaho. Rex worked for the Leslie Salt Company out at the pans around Alkali Lake, and one day he stopped for gas at Sherri's store. Sherri liked the looks of him. She wanted to make Rex into one of her pets, but when she tried to turn on her charm, the thing inside her woke up and sprung the distance between them like a cobra. Rex went down on his knees by the pumps. He tried to fight it, but it was no good. Sherri and he were linked together, the way Jessica and Rex were now.

Rex tried to fight without hurting Sherri. He drove to the store one night with a headache so bad he was sweating blood, and dumped fifty pounds of sugar in her underground gas tank. Other nights he shot out the windows to the store, cut the power lines so everything melted in the freezer. Nothing worked. Sherri decided she wanted to make Rex kiss her boots, so she called him down one night to have it out.

Cracked decal on the door with a cigarette ad on top and the store hours written in faded grease pen underneath. YOUR MASTERCARD WELCOME HERE. Sherri sitting on the counter smiling at him, all prettied up. You

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come here and kiss me, she said. O.K., why not, but when he got close, the thing seemed to loop around his neck and pulled him down. See those boots, pet? They ain't been polished all week. Now you get down there and do it up right. He almost did. But Rex was harder than other men, and had enough will power to do some yanking of his own. He slapped her hard, and then it was Sherri wiping the blood from the corner of her mouth.

Come on, lover boy, let me show you something.... The thing inside was cunning. It tasted Rex's salt-rock body and craved his different kind of strength. Almost imperceptibly, it took away from Sherri and gave to Rex. One rape became another in the battle between them, and then it was Sherri who was begging him to stop as he gathered momentum like rolling down a mountainside until nothing on heaven or earth could have stopped it and the thing entered and burrowed deep and pulsed with the heat of his will.

And then, when it was over, slept again.

The front door slammed, and Jessica jumped. Her mother and father were arguing. Shaking, she pulled her covers over her head. After awhile, someone opened the door to her room.

"Daddy?"

Ken Ramsey squinted as though he could not quite see Jessica on the bed. "You should be sleeping, honey."

"I can't." She bit her lip.

"Jessica, what's the matter?" He knelt to hug her, and recoiled a little when he felt how hard she trembled.

"Oh, Daddy, I'm so scared!"

"What do you have to scared about? Your mother says the tests went very well today. You're fine."

"I'm *not* fine! He's on his way, Daddy, he'll be here tomorrow and I know I'm not strong enough to fight him!"

Ken stood up. "What the *hell* are you talking about?"

"You've got to help me. I can't fight him alone!"

He thought, it's those damn drugs Cyril prescribed. "Nobody's going to hurt you," he said. "You've just been dreaming, that's all."

"Why won't you protect me! You're my father. You're *supposed* to protect me. Why won't you? Why!"

She flailed at him and to stop it, he slapped her. Too hard. He stood over her as she sobbed, and thought how small she looked, almost like a baby again. He took a breath and got control of himself again.

"I know you're confused and scared right now because of what happened to you, but you're going to have to be strong and deal with it. I can't protect you from yourself, Jessica. You're old enough to understand that, aren't you?"

"Yes." She sounded very far away.

"Look. We're all upset and tired around here. Why don't we all get a good night's sleep and start over in the

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morning. I'll take a short day tomorrow, come back early, take us out to dinner. How's that sound?"

"O.K."

"Well. Just don't be scared," he said. "Good night."

He left the room quickly. Jessica lay awake for a long time after that wishing she could somehow get through to her father the way she could to the stranger who was coming to kill her tomorrow.

7

She woke up and tried to make him go away. He was sitting in a booth, drinking coffee with his friend, and the thing inside her showed her how to *twist* a piece of him, like pinching off a bit of clay. He pitched forward, hot coffee soaking his pants, and before the thing let go, the man's friend was forced to do some fast talking to a pair of policemen who thought the man was drunk.

The thing let him go. It would not let the man be arrested. Jessica felt better for making the attempt, but she knew the man was stronger then she was. And he wouldn't let his guard down like that again.

She spent the morning helping her mother arrange furniture in the living room. As lunchtime passed, and Jessica felt nothing, she started believing that maybe the man would give up. Dana put a sawdust log into the fireplace, which made the living room more cheery, even though it did smell like wax. She and her daughter started having fun getting the house into shape.

Then, around two, Corey Madeira came over with Purr-ple on his leash. Corey's mother had sent a jar of homemade pomegranate jelly.

"She'd like to know if you and Mr. Ramsey could come over after dinner to socialize," she said.

Dana laughed. "We'd love to, but we'll have to make it another time. Mr. Ramsey's working late this evening."

"He is? Mom, he promised he'd come home early!"

"I'm sorry, honey, but something's come up—"

"You're *not* sorry, and you know it! Why do you always apologize for Daddy when you don't mean it!"

"That will be enough, young lady!" Dana would have sent Jessica to her room if Corey hadn't been there. "Corey, please thank your mother for the jelly. Jessica and I have some shopping to do now."

"I'm not going!"

"Your doctor says—" Dana stopped and lowered her voice. "Dr. Cyril says you're not to be left alone right now."

"I won't *be* alone. Corey'll stay with me, won't you?"

"Maybe you should go with your mom—"

"No, that's all right. If Jessica wants to stay here, you two can watch television. I won't be gone long." Dana

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pulled on her coat, grabbed her purse, and stalked out the door.

"Wow," Corey said. "What was *that* all about?"

Jessica went to the window. "Corey, if you had to hide from someone — I mean, really hide from somebody who wanted to hurt you — where would you go?"

"From somebody I knew?"

"Not exactly. More like a stranger who knew about you."

Corey nodded. "I'd go where we were on Sunday. Out by the camel barns. Remember all those ammunition bunkers in the valley there? Well, I know where there's an old escape tunnel — for the workers, in case anything went wrong with explosives. It's dry and safe, and hardly anybody knows about it."

Jessica went to the kitchen and dug through one of the boxes until she found a flashlight. She stuffed it into a paper bag, and added a pair of yellow candles and a book of matches. After that, she opened the refrigerator and quickly made a peanut butter sandwich.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going to that tunnel."

"You can't do that! Your mom said you're not supposed to go anywhere by yourself!"

"You going to tell on me?"

"No, but I'm going to keep you here till your mom gets back!" Corey grabbed her wrist and tried to pull her down to sit on her. But Jessica was too strong; she pushed her friend into the wall, where she sank to the floor, blinking and trying to get her breath back.

"Somebody's coming to kill me, Corey. I know it! I just can't sit here and wait for it to happen."

Corey said nothing. Instead, she got up and made a peanut butter sandwich for herself.

"Thanks, Corey."

"Don't say a word! Not one thing until we get out there. Otherwise I just might change my mind." Corey put her sandwich in the bag, then went home to get her bike. When they left, Purrple rode with the bag inside Corey's front basket, quacking grumpily all the way through the cemetery. This time, when they took the path that ended in the jump, Jessica stood on her brake. She did not want to risk another fall.

Clouds had gathered in the southwest when the girls reached the ridgetop overlooking the three old buildings. The last cars were just leaving the lot of the wallpaper factory.

"We'll have to hide the bikes, Corey."

"All right. Down here." They coasted to a dumpster that sat in front of a great clump of anise, and shoved the bicycles in between. Jessica's hands smelled like licorice when she was through.

"O.K. Now where's the tunnel?"

"Down the hollow along the creek bed. This is your last chance to change your mind, Jess." But Jessica was al-

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ready halfway down the rocky path. Corey cradled Purr-ple like a baby and shook her head. Then she followed Jessica to the end of the path. There, overgrown with salt grass and more anise, was a broken steel grate covering the end of a crumbling, rust-streaked culvert. Both girls slipped easily through the opening. It was dark, and smelled of moss inside. Somewhere further inside, water dripped slowly, sometimes missing a beat. When Jessica turned on her flashlight, she found that the tunnel was a lot longer than the beam of light.

"There's an elevator shaft that goes straight up to the camel barns," Corey said. "With a wooden ledge that's dry. Purr-ple's quacking echoed as they walked to it. There, Jessica set up her candles, and Corey took a radio out from her backpack.

"Just in case we're here awhile," she explained. "Want to play some backgammon?"

8

Rex Stabler and Packy Albers stood on the corner of Hillcrest and Alta Vista. Rex stared as a Volvo wagon turned into the driveway of the house he'd been watching. A slender, short-haired woman carried a bag of groceries inside. Half a minute later, she came out again, stood a moment, then ran to another house across the street.

"She's not there," Rex said.

Packy brightened. "Does tha-that ma-mean we can get outta he-he-he-here?"

"Licorice," Rex said with a little smile. "Camels and licorice." He turned toward the cemetery gates. "Through there. The way he moved reminded Packy of a weather vane caught by a sudden gust. "It's only a matter of time now, Pack. It'll tell me where she is." He started across Hillcrest. Packy swore under his breath and grabbed at Rex's arm.

"Ra-rex, you don't wanna ga-go through with this! Let's go da-da-down to that ca-cop sta-shhun and turn ourselves in. You na-need help, Rex! Tom Ru-ruiz, ba-back at Santa Maria, he likes you, Rex, he'll help you fa-fight that thing in your head!"

"You're the only one who can help me, Pack."

"Think about Mary, then! And your baby boy! It ain't right for you to do this!"

"You're not stuttering."

"What?"

"You're talking better than I can." Rex took Packy's shoulders and stared into his eyes. "That makes me think *she's* got to you. Is that right? You working for her now, Pack?"

"Na-na-na-na-no!"

"That's good. Real good." He took money out of his pocket. "Now, I'll tell you what you're gonna do, Pack. You're going down to that hardware store and buy us a good lantern, and some rope. And you're going to do it quick, and meet me right back here. Understand?"

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Packy nodded. He did not want to do what Rex said, but all he could think of was this: *as long as I'm Rex's friend, nobody can hurt me.*

He started off down the hill.

Dana Ramsey and Corey's mother had spent almost two hours driving around Benicia looking for the girls. Then, when it began to rain, they went back home and called the police. The police weren't very helpful — kids ran off all the time — but they promised to put a call out and get back to Dana later. Dana hung up the phone very hard, then went out and made another circuit of town. When she got back to Alta Vista, she found her husband waiting there for her.

"She's still gone?"

"What the hell do you care!"

Ken mumbled, "So she was that scared."

"What are you talking about?"

"Last night, Jessie told me somebody was after her. She was really worked up about it, too. I figured it was some side effect of the medication—"

"*So you decided to ignore it!*"

"I knew you'd be here with her all day. Look, the point is, she was scared of something. Scared enough to want to hide somewhere. And she took Corey with her." Suddenly, he had an idea. "That place she had her attack the other day ... have you looked there?"

"We drove by."

"Did you get out of the car and look around?"

"No."

"O.K. Look, I'm going down there. Call the cops and have them meet me."

"I'm going with you."

"No. Jessica wanted *my* help. I didn't give it to her when she asked. That's something I have to make up for."

She looked at him. "It's too damn late for that, Ken."

He left the house without another word.

Corey yawned. The candles on the elevator dock had burned to their last half-inch. She was cold, and long since bored with the expedition. It was time, she decided, to stop humoring Jessica.

"We're really gonna get it when this is over, you know. I'll bet they're all looking for us."

Jessica sat with her knees drawn up.

"Did you hear me? I'm freezing, poor Purr's starving. Let's get out of here. We'll say we got caught in the rain."

Jessica sighed. She'd been concentrating hard, trying to contact the man named Rex, but there was nothing out there. Maybe she *had* been imagining the whole thing.

"Oh, Corey, maybe you're right—"

A crash echoed from the end of the tunnel.

"What was *that?*" Purr-ple, startled by the noise, ran off. "Purr!"

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"Shh! Oh God, Corey, it's him!"

"How do you know it's not your mom? Or the cops?"

"I just know! Please, Corey!"

"All right. O.K. There's side tunnels ahead. He'll never find us." She turned on the flashlight and pulled Jessica along a few steps.

Then both of them started running.

A few moments later, Rex and Packy reached the wooden elevator dock. Candles burned on either side of a backgammon board. Like an altar in the catacombs, Packy thought. He was staring at the candles when Rex gave him a buck knife.

"If anybody comes, use it." He stared deep into Packy's eyes. "No fooling, Pack."

"No fooling," Packy said. He stepped up between the candles and waited as Rex moved off. He did not have to wait long.

"Jessica?" It was Ken Ramsey, who'd spotted the girls' bikes and entered the tunnel without a flashlight. The candles guttered in the drafts as he came closer. Packy brought the knife down as he jumped, cutting the outside of Ken's arm. He blew bubbles in the scummy water on the tunnel floor; Packy had knocked the wind out of him. He knelt on Ken's back.

"I'm sa-sa-sorry to da-do tha-this, mister," he said, sorrowfully, lifting the knife.

He screamed. A *cat* — a Siamese cat trailing a leash — jumped into his lap and quacked. At Santa Maria, they'd tried using positive reinforcement to take away his bad feelings about cats. The treatment hadn't worked. Packy lunged for the leash, missed, and stumbled off into the darkness in pursuit of his old enemy.

Ken Ramsey rolled over and tried to get his breath back.

Somewhere deep inside the arsenal, below the valley where war-surplus camels once grazed, the water was three inches deep on the tunnel floor. Corey and Jessica sloshed through it, following the fading beam of the flashlight. They turned right into a side passage. Ten paces later, they found it blocked by a massive steel door. It wasn't locked — but that didn't matter because of the ruined hinges.

"*One* of these opens into a bunker," Corey said. "If we can get outside we can tell the cops this guy's down here. Let's try the next one."

The flashlight went out. Corey shook it. Nothing happened, and when she took out the batteries to switch them around, she dropped them into the water. The girls held onto each other. Jessica could feel the wet earth pressing on her, crushing the life out of her.

Then came sudden, dazzling light, and a voice, *his* voice.

"Hello, girls." Jessica saw the noose in his hand before she made out his face.

"Look, mister," Corey said brave-

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ly, "you'd better just leave us alone. The cops'll be here any second!"

"I doubt that. But even if they do come, this little job will be all over." Slowly, he opened the noose. He stared at Jessica. Jessica stared back. Suddenly Corey ran at his legs, trying to knock him down. Rex pushed her hard and made her fall back. She wanted to get up, yet somehow her legs wouldn't work right.

Wind roared through the tunnel. Water blew into Corey's face, as though she was in the prow of a boat on a raging sea. Lightning flashed, and when it did, she saw things that couldn't possibly be there: camels grazing placidly on the hillside, and a village of huts made of woven tule rushes, with smoke rising slowly from cooking fires. Then, even the huts were gone, and the land changed, hills pushing up like growing plants that flowered rock and ash and smoke. It got cold. A mist gathered at the top of the tunnel, a bluish mist that twisted and sank and seemed to form a face with glowing, triumphant eyes, and two arms embracing Jessica and the man named Rex. The face twisted toward the man; Corey heard laughter, and the thing seemed to enter Rex and made him shudder. Jessica cried out, crumpling to her knees.

"Do what you want to me," she gasped. "But leave my friend alone!"

"Can't do it, girl," he said, fitting the noose around Jessica's neck. "You understand I'm doing you a favor, don't you? This thing inside of us doesn't care who lives and who dies. The people who had it before, they had to do the same thing. Meet, and fight, and die. I'm the one that lost, kid. You're the lucky one. You know I'm tellin' the truth, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Jessie! Don't give up! Don't—"

Purr-ple ran between them, with Packy stumbling behind, reaching for the leash. It broke Rex's concentration enough for Corey to move, and she clutched at the rope, trying to yank it from Rex's hands.

The beam of another flashlight caught them that way. Corey and Rex with one end of the rope; Packy sprawled between them and Jessica, who knelt calmly in the water. She had stopped crying.

The Benicia policeman held his service revolver out with both hands. He had no intention of shooting. But then the girl with the noose around her neck stood up and looked into his eyes. His finger squeezed ever so slightly around the trigger.

Rex Stabler could stop a lot of things. But he could not stop the .38 bullet that tore into his head.

Corey and Jessica watched as the last of the boxes were loaded into the van.

"I'm sorry you're going back to San Francisco," Corey said. "But maybe, after what happened, it's best."

"Yes," Jessica said. "We were a lot happier there."

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"Well. At least your mom and dad are getting along better now."

In the living room of the house on Alta Vista, Dana and Ken Ramsey put their arms around each other and kissed. They stayed that way for a long time.

Until their daughter got tired of watching them.

Coming next month

The October 34th anniversary issue is shaping up as one of our best anniversary issues ever; it will include the following:

"Sam Gunn" by BEN BOVA
"The Cat Hotel" by FRITZ LEIBER
"Downtown" by THOMAS M. DISCH
"Manifest Destiny" by JOE HALDEMAN
"Not An Affair" by THEODORE STURGEON
"La Ronde" by DAMON KNIGHT
"Spending A Day At the Lottery Fair" by FREDERIK POHL
"To Slay the Dragon" by P. E. CUNNINGHAM

Watch for the October issue, on sale September 1, or send us the coupon on page 144.

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Raylyn Moore, who has been contributing superior stories to F&SF for almost 15 years, makes a welcome return with this story about a man whose wilderness dreams change his life.

Running Easy In the Dream of Wilderness

BY
RAYLYN MOORE

Those many seasons at the start of his life, spent with the mother-person, had taught Bae-bee the word-sounds of the Others for ordinary things, and also feelings. Hunger, cold wetness, fear. These he felt now as he hid at the base of the cliff in a drift of early snow. He also felt pain, the worst feeling, bigger than the rest.

His leg held most of the pain and would not move. A gray sun had crossed dimly from one side of the gray sky to the other while he lay there, for it was the danger time, the light time, when the Others walked the mountains. And Bae-bee was not really hidden, though he had dragged himself to the spot under a piece of rock sticking out from the rock wall above.

He waited alone for the dark, the safe time, when the Family would be running again and might come back for him. Or might not. For those he had run with were full of fear too, and might not dare go back, as they usually did, for a hurt one. They especially might not when the hurt one was not a true member of the Family.

Bae-bee had spent the waiting time thinking, remembering other things that had happened to him. And he had slept in short naps, and dreams had come — but each time the pain had shaken him awake again, before he could hold onto the dreams and wonder about them. He had never felt this much pain before, though he had known sickness.

The sickness had been worst during the first season of cold after he left the place of the mother-person to join the runnings. The hair of his own body was much thinner than the dark pelts of the true members of the Family. When the rain fell from the world's roof and kept on coming changed to

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snow, Bae-bee, running always at the end of the line, felt his chest grow heavy. He coughed slime and gasped for air and shook with cold until one of the mother-things from the Family ran alongside and took him on her back. Later, when the light time came, she hid him in the sleeping place close to her and at dark time ran with him again. She had done this until the sickness went away and he could run by himself.

By the next turning of the seasons he had grown strong and taller, and the wet cold no longer made him cough. But he was still the smallest of the Family, with the shortest legs. His body coat grew coarser and thickened but never really kept him from feeling the sharp winds which the rest of them never seemed to mind.

Too slow in the runnings, too small to push over the larger rotted stumps and logs to find the grubs, not quick enough to grab and hold the fish slipping past under the river surface. Because of these things the Family might not have let him stay with them, except for the learning he brought with him.

Bae-bee tied a thorn to a long, tough vine. On the thorn he stuck a grub, and showed the Family how to use a fish-catcher like the one the mother-person and he had used in his early days with her.

He sharpened a small rock against a larger, harder rock, and with the cutting edge took the skin from a deer found dead in the woods and scraped it dry. Later he pounded it soft and tied it around himself to make up for his lack of hair.

"Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah." The Family watched Bae-bee do these things and grunted their surprise. When a rock was too heavy, Bae-bee used a tree limb for a levering stick. He made leaf bundles of nuts and seeds and tied them in his deerskin to share later if hunger came and food was thin. For the Family never stored food or carried it over long distances. They hunted wherever they were and went hungry when there were no birds' eggs or the snow covered the roots, and the burrows of small ground animals.

Then he made a mistake.

He rubbed dry splinters till a spark fell into a pile of wood dust, the way the mother-person had shown him, but when the flame leaped, the watching Family moaned and whistled in fear and ran from him.

They already knew fire, and it was bad. Sometimes it came out of nowhere to the summer forest, and the Family ran from its choking breath. It had happened even inside the mountain and spilled down the slopes, blackening the trees, causing the Family to flee that time in the longest running of all, through both the light and dark hours.

When Bae-bee was allowed to come back to the Family after throwing dirt over the small flames in the wood dust, it was understood that he would not try fire again.

But even this mistake added to the

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way they felt about him. He had become their link to the Others, the feared and dangerous enemy, so he was useful. He knew the Others in a way they never could, knew the bad things their guns could do from a distance, the terrible speed with which their machines took whole groves of trees off the mountain slopes, leaving the land bare. And if any of them distrusted him for these same reasons, Bae-bee had seen no sign of it. With him and with one another they were mostly gentle and quiet, and only very rarely quarrelsome.

It was shortly after Bae-bee's fire-making that the Family tumbled out of the sleeping place in the middle of the light time, warned by the lookout that Others were moving near. Two of the young females stayed by his side during the running, though he was, as always, at the end of the line. And when the speed of the sudden flight made his breathing loud, they took him up by the shoulders on either side and bore him along.

For these two special ones, he first began sing-telling stories, the way the mother-person had once done for him. When the Family was gathered in the resting and sleeping places, as the sun rose over the trees, he would make the sounds very softly. Later, when he found not just the young females but the whole Family listening, he let the sounds out louder and higher. None understood the meaning of the word-sounds, but they all seemed soothed by his voice moving from note to note. And they would try to sing-song along with the story, even the Old, the Family chief, though his voice was only a harsh bellow.

Sing-telling the stories turned out to be the best of the things Bae-bee did for the Family. It made them happy and playful, gave them something else to think of besides the troubles of staying alive in their land which was growing more and more dangerous with every passing season, and smaller as the Others came from all sides bringing their machinery that took away the trees and mashed the meadows flat.

Hiding under the cliff, Bae-bee now began softly sing-telling to himself of these past happenings. His life with the Family had been good. He had not wanted it to end with him separated from them and all alone.

Right after he had fallen, before the pain began to spread, he had tried to walk but could not even stand, then tried to stand but could not rise. There was nothing more he could do now to help himself but go on hiding, waiting.

But too much time had passed. The sun had gone long ago. The Family, running again, would be far away now. There would be no way he could ever catch up and be taken in by them again, even if he knew which way they had gone.

Dr. Grebe stared down at Spandler with undisguised curiosity. Spandler

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stared back from the hospital bed in honest bewilderment as he took in his surroundings.

"I'll go over this once more, now that you've had a chance to get comfortable," the older man said in his soothing, not-quite-condescending doctor's voice. "There are indeed fractures that occur from stress alone, in which case one might not be aware of the actual moment or even the period of time when the injury occurs. Your case, however, is something else again, as I shouldn't need to tell you. The Xrays show massive dislocation of the foot bones, rupture of the Achilles tendon, major fracture of the tibia, and a shattered patella. I've done what emergency repair we're equipped for here, and I'm prepared to send you along to an orthopedic surgeon in Seattle as soon as you're able to travel. So that leaves us with only one loose end that should be cleared up."

The doctor paused expectantly. Spandler said nothing. "We're required to file reports on accidents. Traffic, industrial — you understand. Somebody runs over a man's left leg with a dozer, it has to go down on paper. Now, tell me all you remember about what happened to you last night, please."

In response to the direct command, Spandler made an effort to cooperate, to come back at least halfway from the fringes of shadow into which his mind had retreated since the recent hypodermic. "I was running."

"Running where? Running away from someone?"

"I'm not sure. I was running along a trail down a mountain."

"You were alone?"

"No. I was with—" A smoky tendril of the shadow reached from the deeper body of darkness to bring him back. He dodged to avoid it, and suddenly remembered caution. "Yes, I was alone."

Grebe paused, started to make a penciled note on the clipboard he'd held tucked under his arm, then evidently thought better of it. He sank into the visitor's chair by the bedside and crossed his legs, the board ready on one knee.

Spandler knew he had made a mistake which might prolong the interview when all he, Spandler, wanted was to get the talk over with and lose himself in the dream he knew was waiting for him.

"Why were you running?"

"For exercise. And — private reasons."

"Can you tell me if your private reasons had anything to do with your being angry with someone? Someone who might have retaliated by doing you harm?"

"Of course not. I just like being in wilderness areas, observing the wildlife, the forest."

"In the middle of the night?"

"The evening. I've been running every evening."

"Actually it was two this morning when you were left in the lounge of the

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emergency room. Who brought you in?"

"I don't remember. Some people found me and picked me up, I guess. I didn't get their names. Strangers."

"Could they have been the same people who ran over you with their car?"

"No. I didn't even see a car. My leg gave out suddenly while I was running. I went down and then I couldn't get up." Now he was struggling in slow motion with the shadow tendril, alternately merging with it and separating from it, as if in an underwater ballet.

Dr. Grebe shrugged. "If you are protecting someone, it would ordinarily be your business and yours alone, except that there was some kind of accident, obviously, so it'll be between you and the sheriff. I see you have a San Francisco address. Just move here recently, did you?"

This time Spandler had to make even more of an effort to answer. The slowing of time, a recognizable part of the encroaching dream, had already begun. "Just here for the summer."

"You also have a local address?"

"Cabin up on the ridge."

A pause which was pure silence.

"Is there anyone you want notified?" The voice seemed to be coming from farther away. Either the doctor had risen and moved toward the door, as Spandler hoped, or.... "Can you hear me? I asked if there is anyone you want notified that you're in the hospital."

But Spandler found he could run again, and sprinted quickly away from the doctor into the denser part of the shadows, into the dream. Healed and whole, he ran on and on. Running, running. Doing better this time than he had ever done before the accident. Accident. But there had been no accident. That much of what he had told the doctor was true.

Running. Running to escape. Running to catch up. Timing his breathing to the swift rhythm of his feet along the endless trail.

"Notified," said the voice from far away. "Notified." It was only an echo from the wall of mountain ahead.

Perhaps, running better than he ever had before, he would be able this time to keep up.

"Notified," repeated the voice. But Spandler unheeding, ran on.

There had been one clear, warm night, silvered by the moon, when the wind brought no scent of danger. The Family was at ease in the resting place. On that night Bae-bee sang-told the story of his own beginning, the first part of it in exactly the words the mother-person had used when she told it to him.

Long ago in the Cascades (the Others' word-sound for these mountains), a woman-person had lived long alone, because the man-person who had brought her there had died of an accident when he was cutting trees.

Deep into one night after she had

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gone to sleep, she heard a sound at her cabin door during a storm which had dropped much snow. Being alone had made her strong, almost without fear. So she rose at once and, not bothering to load the deer rifle she kept handy, she opened the door.

A large dark thing huddled just outside, but made no move toward her. The woman-person had a tender heart. She loved animals and had often taken in injured smaller things. This animal was larger then any she had seen, but she sensed that it was weak and sick and had come to her for help. She was big herself, taller even than the man-person she had lost. She pulled and tugged at her visitor, at last rousing him, and with the last of his strength he crawled into the cabin and lay still.

She put the last of her chopped wood in the fireplace but after it burned away, the dark furred thing on the cabin floor had not moved. So she brought quilts from her own bed and lay beside it through the dark time, warming it with her own body. At last, when light came, it moved and opened gentle eyes and seemed to thank her without word-sounds.

For many days she kept it close to her in the cabin as it got slowly well. It was a thinking animal — at least in every way that was important. It followed her around as she worked and tried to help as she scrubbed and swept. But it was too big for most inside chores. It knocked things over and its head almost touched the rafters. So she taught it to fetch things from outside: the snow water which was brought in buckets to melt, and the deer meat and vegetables she kept stored through the dark season. And it brought firewood, though it grew impatient with her lessons on how to use the ax and often just broke the tree limbs into sticks using its own great strength. The first few times it watched her light the fire, it backed to the far wall and seemed afraid, but gradually it grew to trust her and would come nearer the warming blaze.

And every night, as on the first night, it slept on her floor and she covered it with her quilts and warmed it with her body when the fire died.

In her long time alone, the woman-person had grown away from the beliefs and habits she had once thought important. When she found that her wild friend could return love just like the man she had lost, she did not object. He was rough and big and he was an animal — this she never forgot, but he was also a part of her life in that wild place. She even grew to like the smell of wildness upon him, which did not lessen even after he had lived many days in the cabin.

When the warm weather came again and he was well enough to leave, she knew she could make him stay if she chose, but she could tell he thought often of some world she did not know. As he went off down the mountain trail into the forest, she watched him

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out of sight, keeping both hands tight over her mouth to keep herself from calling him back to her.

In the late part of the next dark season, when the snow had come and gone again, the mother-person went into a tiring, bloody struggle, singing all the songs she knew to hold off pain, and then she had Bae-bee. That was the word-sound she sang to him when she first saw him, and the only name he had ever known.

Ten full turns of the season they spent together, and she taught him all he could learn of the life of the Others, the people she had come from and had never gone back to, because life on the mountain had seemed better to her.

There was long silence in the sleeping place after Bae-bee finished the sing-telling of his own story that the mother-person had given him. And if the Family had not understood all the meaning of it, it was clear they had shared his strong feeling as he sang.

In the silence Bae-bee knew they were waiting to hear more. He would tell them more, the part of his story that only he knew, of the time he had spent alone. When he began singing again, they settled back, ready to hear the rest.

He told them of the morning the mother-person did not move from her bed, did not rise to give him food. Bae-bee spent that day and the night holding her to him, for she was cold. He sang to her the songs she had taught him and rocked her and tried to make her wake. But nothing changed. So when the next light came, he followed some knowing he found deep inside himself. With her shovel and hoe he scratched and tore at the hard earth near the cabin. It took all day to make the hole large enough. The sun was moving away as he brought her and put her there and covered earth over her, while wetness dropped from his eyes.

It was then the sun season, and for many more risings of it he did over and over things he had been taught, digging out the yellow and white roots from the garden and chopping wood to make the roots tender over the fire. But once when he was hungry he ate them just as they came from the earth, without even waiting to wash them in the bucket, and found they stopped his hunger just as well. After that he built the fire only to make tender the small animals he caught in the snares set out long before by the mother-person.

Still later, eating the cooked meat, he remembered how much easier it had been to eat the root raw. Next time he took a small animal and killed it, he skinned back the fur and bit into the flesh without bothering to start the fire. It was slippery and tough, but his teeth were strong.

After that he didn't need the fire. Without the smell of smoke, he found that the animals came closer to the cabin, and he didn't have to go so far to find them. He grew lazy and lay in the sun and played. But before long he

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knew his mistake. As the new cold began, the animals started to disappear. Bae-bee had also eaten all the roots from the garden and forgotten how the mother-person made them grow again. And he had forgotten to store some of the white roots and the grain cobs for the time of snow. Sometimes then he went hungry. Fear came when he thought ahead to the time when he might have nothing at all.

One day as the cold sun was going away he sat in the cabin doorway, thinking about these things he had done wrong, or forgotten to do. At a slight sound from across the clearing, he looked up and saw dark shadows beside the trees where the forest began. There were three of these shapes, tall animal forms like standing bears but much larger. They seemed somehow familiar, yet he had no word-sound to name them.

When they saw he was watching them, they turned and were suddenly gone into the trees.

That night Bae-bee was so hungry he couldn't sleep. The moon came and he went from the cabin into the forest. There were no animals in the snares, but he broke off some soft, rotten parts of a hollow tree and found white grubs that made the hunger almost stop. He knew the mother-person would not have let him eat such things, but he also knew she had loved him and would not have wanted him to be hungry. He found a fallen log. Under its loose bark were more of the fat insects hiding from the coming cold. From that time Bae-bee knew that he could live without the cabin as well as without fire. He went back, though, and spent the rest of the night on the ground where the garden had been. His mind was working at a plan which came partly from things the mother-person had told him and partly from the knowing inside him. When light came, he would go down the mountain as he knew the small animals did, to find the remaining patches of warmth. The mother-person had not done this because she had the cabin and the fire and could stay through the worst cold in the high place.

When the time came, he went only once back into the cabin because he had remembered the rifle the mother-person kept in a corner beside the fireplace. For a long time he looked at it. Just a few times in his life he had seen her use it, once to bring down a deer that was trampling her garden and eating the new plants. The noise had frightened him, and he had run away and hidden all day in the forest though she had called and called him. When he was older she had talked to him about how the gun worked but never let him touch it nor showed him how to load and hold it. Bae-bee decided now to leave the rifle where it was.

When he went out of the cabin for the last time it was still not quite full light. Along the tree line five of the strange-familiar tall figures were standing. This time they did not leave when he looked at them. He watched them

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for a while and they watched him. It was almost as if they had been waiting for him, expecting him.

He started down the mountain toward them. As before they turned toward the trees. He followed. Moving ahead of him on the forest trail, they looked much bigger than they had seemed from the clearing. He kept walking at a distance from them but was close enough to catch their rank, wild odor and hear a whistling sound they made among themselves. And sometimes a chattering, ah-ah-ah-ah-ah, as if they were talking about him, or maybe calling to him to move faster. For this was a problem. They seemed in a great hurry and he was soon nearly out of breath. There were times when he thought he lost them, could not see them ahead through the trees, but he kept on, farther and farther down the slopes of the mountain, where he had meant to go anyway.

As the light came on stronger, they moved even faster. When they began to run, Bae-bee almost gave up, but at last there was a flat meadow, where the earth was greener and the frost hadn't come yet. So it was true, about the lingering summer warmth farther down. Bae-bee stopped running, deciding that wherever the strangers ahead of him were going, it did not matter. He would stay where he was. Then he saw they had run across the meadow and stopped themselves where the trees started again on the far side. More of them were already gathered there. Many of them. He would learn that nearby was a sleeping place, and this was the Family.

He pressed on, very curious about what he had seen. The air under the trees was heavy with the rank, wild smell. When he came among them, there was much more of the chattering. Ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah. And low whistling and murmuring. The Family moved back, leaving a clear space around him for a time, but they never stopped staring at him, and finally they, too, became more curious than fearful. Some came close then, and several touched him, murmuring over the thin hair covering his skin, the harsh feel of the canvas trunks made for him by the mother-person. At last one of the mother-things from the Family came near and held out a half-eaten haunch of squirrel or chipmunk. Bae-bee took it and began to gnaw hungrily.

He called them "Family" because that was the word-sound for not living all alone. And from that time he lived with them, hunted food with them, ran with them, and became fearful of the occasional nearness of the Others, though he knew his own mother-person had been of the Others. But in a way he was only making a choice as she herself had. The woman alone on the mountain had never gone back to her old life. Neither would Bae-bee.

When he opened his eyes, there was a sense of much lapsed time, a

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day, perhaps more, and Marla was sitting at his side in the chair occupied before by Dr. Grebe. Reluctantly, he let go his hold on the dream. Her legs were clearly defined under a fall of slate blue fabric, but when she leaned forward to drop a light kiss on his dry lips, he discovered that his close vision was slightly blurry. "Are you real?"

"I hope so." She smiled tentatively.

"What about your valuable job?"

"The Fashion Institute is mucking along without me for five days. I'm only a course coordinator anyhow, not an instructor. Not even a mannequin."

"That isn't the kind of thing you were saying when you refused to come with me in June. You said you couldn't be spared even for a day."

Marla sighed. "The summer term was beginning then; now it's the middle of autumn, not so much paper work. Anyway, I didn't say I'd *quit* my valuable job, just took a few days off. But I didn't come twelve hundred miles so we could start quarreling about that again."

"Really? What did you come twelve hundred miles to quarrel about?"

"Jeff, stop it! I came because the sheriff called and said you'd been in an accident."

"What sheriff?"

"I don't remember his name. He said he was the sheriff and he was phoning from Unpronounceable, Washington. I was too upset to write everything down, just the address of this hospital and a few directions about how to get here from Seattle. How do you feel?"

"Confused. I swear I never gave anyone your phone number. I never even wrote you where I'd gone after I left San Francisco."

"I noticed that, but I'm willing to overlook it. Perhaps, since we lived together a whole year, my phone number was somehow on your ID, especially since it was your number too, until five months ago. Makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Nothing makes sense. When I left, you had no plans ever to see me again. You told me so several times. Yet here you are."

"Let's not talk about that yet. How did this accident happen? Dr. Grebe said something about a hit-run driver when you were running along a road."

"Ah, splendid. He's made up a story to fit into the blanks on his report. I'm off the hook."

"You mean it wasn't a car that ran over your leg?"

"I mean there was no accident, not that kind."

Marla shifted uncomfortably in the chair. She opened and closed her leather shoulder bag carefully but abstractedly. She said, "Jeff, what's *wrong* with you?"

"My leg seems to be busted all to hell. And I'm supposed to have symptoms of prolonged exposure, even though the weather around here has been fairly warm for the season, and I wasn't out in it very long until I was

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picked up and brought here."

"But what are you so defensive about? What are you hiding?"

"If I tell you, will you listen?"

"Not if you're going to start that fantasizing about—" She bit her lip, drew a deep breath, and said firmly, "If it's important to you, I shall try very hard."

"It's the most important thing that ever happened to me."

"All right. Go on."

"I'm sure you know why I came here after I left you."

"I know why you *said* you wanted to come. Because of the dream you were having so often. And didn't I urge you to go? I was hoping that getting away from the city would at least help you get your head straight."

"And so it has. I finally did it, Marla. I found *him*. Or maybe I should say I found myself, found out who I am when I dream. And I found *them*. There are a lot more of them than I thought, than anyone thinks. And it's all true, the things I've dreamed, about living in the forest, hunting for food, being afraid and running from the fear. Moving gradually down the mountains just ahead of the snow lines, and then back up in the spring. And there are good times, playing in sunny clearings, swimming in lakes so clean you can see bottom, and running miles just for the joy of it."

"And getting your leg smashed?"

"Yes, that was part of it. Only there was no car, not even a road. I fell. My night vision and sense of balance were never quite so good as theirs. It was during the night running. The lookout had whistled us to hurry and we moved out fast. There'd been a smell on the wind, something coming too near, they thought. I was trying to keep up and didn't realize how near we were to the cliff edge."

Marla remained silent, but with a visible effort. Then she said carefully, "Are you telling me you *dreamed* the accident that hurt your leg?"

"Not exactly. I — I'm not sure. Forget it. I shouldn't have bothered you with—"

"No, don't stop. I promised I'd listen, but it's no good listening if I don't understand."

"That's all there is to tell."

"But surely you can see that there's much more to ask about. If you'd stayed where you were, not come all the way up here, mightn't you have dreamed the same things and not gotten hurt?"

"Maybe. But then I would never have been sure, as sure as I am now, that I was dreaming of a real place, real events. Coming closer to the real thing made it really happen for me, I suppose."

The silence again, then cautiously: "So can you give it up now? Now that this thing, whatever it is, has happened to you?"

"And do what instead?"

"Whatever you want. Maybe after your leg heals you could get your job

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back with the film import place. Surely you don't want to stay on here, with winter coming? You're not a hunter or trapper. You're not a comparative zoologist or wilderness expert. How could you succeed up here, looking for something that exists only in a dream, when hundreds of others have come up with nothing, or very little?"

"Evidently you didn't understand after all, Marla. I *have* succeeded."

"Then you *will* come back with me? I still have the rental car I brought from Sea-Tac. Dr. Grebe thinks you'll be well enough by tomorrow to drive back to Seattle with me, to the hospital for the operation he has set up for you."

"And after that?"

"After that you could at least think about coming back to San Francisco, couldn't you? I'm not even suggesting that we'd be together as we were, not until we've both thought a lot more about it, but you could stay at the apartment while you recuperate. Maybe you'll want to use the time to write about what you've experienced, what you know."

"I appreciate the offer. As for writing about this, never. It's not so much that no one would believe it, but the danger someone might. It would be bad for *them* if there were more harassment, more hunters here, more jeeps crashing through the forest. I didn't tell you this but they're dying. When they're all together, it seems like a big population, but the birth rate is low, food is dwindling every year. And this group may be the last. I want to leave them in as much peace as they still have."

"Whatever you say, about the writing. Now how about the invitation to come home?"

"No."

"Just — no?" Marla moved forward, toward him, in a gentle swirl of slate blue. Her image blurred again, faded. He could not put her features together even with the help of memory. She was still arguing, very tensely now. "I know what you're afraid of. You don't want to lose the dream of running. But you wouldn't. It's atavistic, isn't it? After all, man is a running animal. How about the Masai warriors? And you did tell me you were on the track team in college, didn't you? A clockmaker is bound to dream about mainsprings and escapements, isn't he? And a football player of dropkicks and yard lines?"

At least he owed it to her to keep nothing from her. "I won't be going anywhere, Marla, not even to Seattle. I'm dying, too."

"Don't say that, Jeff. You're not going to die, not of a broken leg. That's crazy."

The color suited her, Spandler thought, a complement to her brown-blondeness and easy grace. Above the blurred aureole of her hair, the creamy-clean hospital ceiling seemed to be disappearing behind a bank of clouds borrowed from the sky over the

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mountains. And it was cold, growing colder in the room.

The young female who stayed closest to him he called Mah-ree, which had been the mother-person's name. When he said. "Mah-ree," she would come to him. When he spoke other sounds to her — "tree" or "rock" — she would reach to touch what he named. He even taught her a game from his early life in which she did as he did, every motion, except when he gave a certain sign. Then she was to be still and do nothing. Sometimes she missed the sign and did the things anyway. Then they would both shout with the fun of it and roll together in the pine needles.

But the game he tried to show her by laying rocks out on the ground and saying, "One, two, three...." was too hard for her. Bae-bee understood that she was not sure why, after he had already taught her the "rock" word-sound, he was now calling the rocks "one" and "two." So he tried the game again with leaves and once again with sticks, but her eyes held only the shiny darkness of wonder, none of the sudden understanding that came with the other teachings.

There was a season of no-sun colder than the rest. Ice and snow came almost as soon as the warmth left, with no cool, easy time between. The Family crawled into a cave used before, low on the mountains, still thick with the sour, sharp smell of themselves in a place the sun never reached, but it was a good place to stay quietly through the time of high drifts and blizzards.

Bae-bee and Mah-ree huddled together in the dark, and Mah-ree held to her breast the new one among them. He was not so hairless as Bae-bee had been in his own early time, but he was bony and sickly because the Family had gone hungry so long.

During the first short thaw Bae-bee went out of the cave and dug through the layers of snow for roots and pine nuts and brought them back for Mah-ree, though he was hungry himself and growing weaker. His biggest fear now was that the new one would grow cold and still as the only other one of the Family had, earlier in this cold season, as his own mother-person had in the cabin long ago.

But the new one slept most of the winter, saving what strength he had, and when the sun came up strong again at last, he was still alive. The Family came out of the cave to hunt food, and Mah-ree carried the new one on her back in the deerskin Bae-bee had once scraped and stretched to cover his own skin against the cold.

It seemed such a short time ago, this time he was now remembering, and the summer that followed in which the new one grew strong and playful. Now the cold was back, and Bae-bee was hurt and hiding under the cliff from which he had tumbled in the night running. He had likely not even been missed until the Family was many

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miles farther along.

Even if they came back for him, they would not know where to begin to search.

Bae-bee had saved the thoughts of Mah-ree and the new one for the last, because they were both safe with the Family. In thinking of them he formed a kind of thought that the mother-person would have called a hope. He hoped that in time, with many seasons, the new one would grow tall as the Old, and that his legs would not be short, and that when he was running with the Family, he would be in front, running ahead, not barely keeping up in the rear, as Bae-bee had always done.

And Mah-ree. If he had had one more season with her, he might have been able to make her understand the counting game. But that was not to be.

The pain in his leg had long since changed to numbness. Now there was another change, when the numbness gave way to dreamy strangeness. He seemed to be floating like a hawk above the mountains, and then descending to a place where he had never been. It was a dream, of course. He felt a crinkly softness beneath and around him that he knew no word-sound for. He might, he thought, be dreaming he was lying on a cot like the one in the mother-person's cabin, yet the feel of the softness was nothing like the roughness of the quilts and woolen blankets she had pulled over him at night when he slept there.

A white shape moved past him. There was a click-click like a squirrel in a tree, but it was not a squirrel, he knew. He was no longer cold from resting in the snowdrift. Now he felt neither pain nor cold, nor anything at all. But he could hear word-sounds he did not know, spoken by the white shape as it passed, and passed again.

Then there was more than one white shape, and a sudden glare of light that was not the sun. The shapes made many quick movements around him. One of the word-sounds was said two more times, but it still brought no meaning. For it was one the mother-person had never taught him. "Embo-lissem." One of the white shapes said, "A possible embo-lissem."

He found he had no fear of the white shapes in his dream as they said the word-sound and moved between him and the strong light that seemed to be slowly dimming like the sinking sun on a gray day. Even the whiteness of the shapes changed then, becoming part of the snow, which was falling again, drifting over him, hiding him forever where he lay in his secret place on the mountain.

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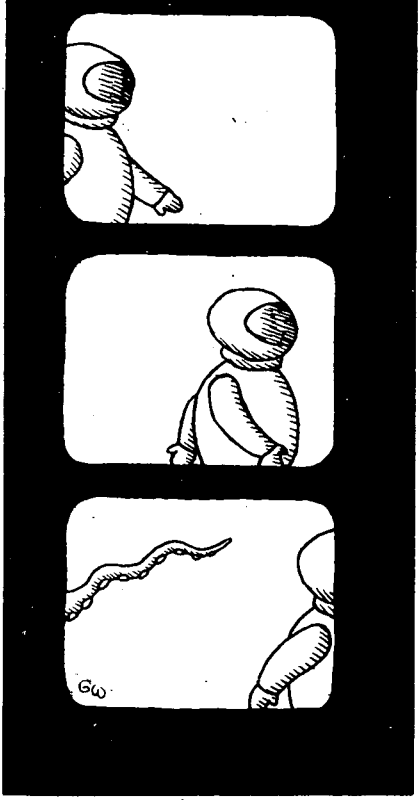
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

VISITING WRONGS

I had just come back from France, where I found myself, at one point, standing on a balcony in the full moon over the battlements of the walled city of Carcassonne and listening to a nightingale singing in the gardens below; and at another sitting in the ancient Roman arena of Arles watching the *gardians*, the herdsmen of the wild white horses of the Comargue, playing their ancient horseback games at their 472nd annual *fete*. I was therefore in no mood for nonsense.

This might then account for my feelings when confronted the first night of my return with a piece of prime time network claptrap succinctly entitled *V*. (The title was the only succinct thing about it, since it ran four hours over two evenings.) But I doubt it. Had I spent the previous two weeks in Cleveland, I feel that I still would have been unamused.

Watching it, I had the eerily dislocated feeling of being back in the paranoid '50s; depite a modern production (sort of) featuring what has become an instant cliche of huge ships hovering over sections of landscape, or in this case, cityscape, we were right back to — the bug-eyed monsters are coming from outer space to ... GIT US.

It began with the ships over the major cities of Earth, straight out of *Childhood's End*. But these are not the ambiguously friendly overlords of that novel. These ETs are humanoid, and

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almost all of them are really spiffy-looking, bearing a great resemblance to TV actors. And they come in peace and friendship, so they say; all they want are some useless Earth chemicals, and in exchange they're going to share with us the wisdom of the universe. Now anyone with half a mind would see there's something peculiar here, particularly since they all look like TV actors, but there doesn't seem to be a half a mind available on Earth; nobody even mutters anything about Greeks bearing gifts.

The newcomers are dubbed Visitors and are suddenly all over the place, starting Be-Kind-To-Alien groups among the young and engaging in other positive activities. Eventually somebody does develop half a mind, a TV reporter, of all unlikely people, and sneaks up to one of the mother ships. *Merde, alors!* These are *not* visitors you want around, not even for a weekend. To begin with, while on their own premises they snack on live mice. While this might just be passed off as one of those private peculiarities everyone has, there's worse to come. It eventually develops that they *really* want our water *and*, adding insult to injury, *us* to snack on. And the final blow is that they don't really look like TV actors; underneath they have highly unpleasant reptilian faces that you certainly wouldn't want to take home to Mother.

In the meantime, the Visitors have infiltrated and cajoled and used mind-influencing devices to the point where they're just about running things, and their little fan clubs have turned into sort of Hitler Youth Groups, and things look bleak for the Earthlings. But mankind reverts to the guerrilla, and underground war is waged, mainly by scientists, our TV reporter, and a beautiful young lady doctor (in the '50s, it was a beautiful young lady biologist).

The major villain, by the way, is a beautiful young TV actress type (a reptile deep down inside, of course) who takes pleasure in inflicting pain on humans. Now since the aliens have been characterized already as brutal, can she be decried for being sadistic? Or is she just being Visitor-ish, only more so? Or is there a particular kind of perversion among the Visitors which manifests itself in cruelty to other races? Just one of those questions that drift through the mind when what one is watching is less than absorbing.

It remains only to note that the dialogue was abysmal and the acting was excruciating, even on the part of the capable Marc Singer (who, some may be surprised to know, was one of the better Petruchios of our time some years back in a PBS-broadcast *The Taming of the Shrew*). And that this was another of those that left everything hanging, a sure sign that a series was being hoped for by those responsible. So we may yet get *W*, *X*, *Y* and *Z*.

And now, gentle readers, a first. I

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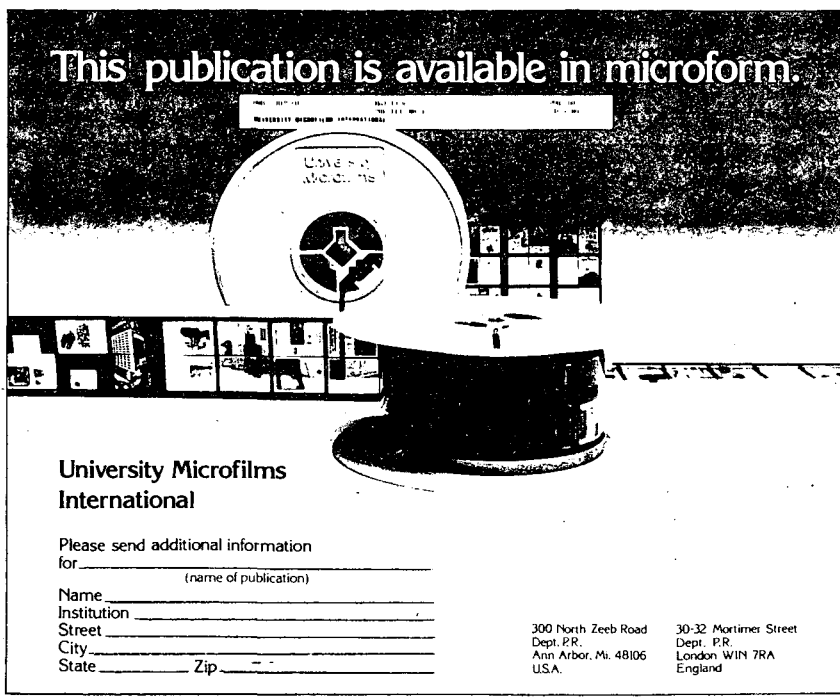
have never, in this space, reviewed a commercial. But there is one turning up with some frequency as I write that is well worth keeping an eye out for. It is for British Airways, and is based on the statistic that the number of people BA transports across the Atlantic per year is equivalent to the population of Manhattan. We see a series of Britons (including a wonderfully phlegmatic dog) becoming aware of something dazzling in the sky above them. Finally seen clearly, crossing above a row of Tudor houses, it is Manhattan, aloft and outglittering the Mother Ship from *Close Encounters* (which, come to think of it, I remember characterizing as looking like Las Vegas torn up by the roots). Shades of James Blish's *Cities In Flight!* Here indeed is the above mentioned cliche of the hovering giant craft, but used by the commercial makers with wit and real style (one of the first glimpses we get is a reflection in a puddle). Maybe *they* should be making the stuff on TV that the commercials fill the gaps of. I'd certainly prefer this commercial to something like *V*.



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CBS news correspondent Reid Collins has written a couple of fantasies for F&SF, most recently "The Buck," (July 1982). He proves equally comfortable with SF in this first-rate story about the last manned mission to the Triad Galaxy.

Song From the Triad Galaxy

BY
REID COLLINS

Major Stafford watched the Earth clock's second hand toiling on its axis and tried in vain to imagine what time it was at home. The word "home" was never mentioned aboard ship. Even in the privacy of his quarters, Stafford did not permit himself to utter the word aloud. Among the crew it was "back there," or, among the junior officers on the make for advancement, it was simply "Earth." They knew that Major Stafford would note this as "satisfactory orientation" in his personnel log at "night," the artificially induced rest period aboard ship, the period such as now, when, lying on his pallet in quarters, he found himself forming the word with his lips and, for the first time on this mission, heard his voice say "home."

The sound of it took him back to an agri-complex in the Missou-Kansas Sector where great irrigator wheels wound out diameters of green hybrid corn and where as a youth he had lain on the damp earth at night and listened to the growing. Everything was understood about the process now. There were no mysteries, no vagaries of weather as there had been in his grandfather's time. Remembering when he had lain as a boy sucking in the verdant odor of loamy soil and listening to the faint crack of the growing stalks, he remembered his grandfather's telling of the same experience.

"Lyin' out and listenin'," the old man would chuckle, and finally break into nods as if to confirm the memory and to impress upon the young Stafford some sense of irretrievable time. The old man had been unlucky enough to have lived into a period of rapidly accelerated progress that pitched him into a time he knew not, an age which became for him a nodding incompre-

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hension in which, confused, he at last had died.

Stafford's mind traced his own growth. Flight school, Lorraine, marriage, and their child. He fished in his ditty bag and found the pictures. As usual, he did not unfold the frames right away. Instead, he held them closed upon his chest for a moment, then opened them slowly. Even then he did not look right away, but held his eyes averted. When he allowed himself to look, he gazed first at her photograph in the left frame of the triptych, then at her and the boy in the center frame, and lastly at the three of them posed in the right frame. Again he formed and uttered the word "home." He was certain that this private exercise was not illegal, proscribed by mission regs, but it was not "shipboard," either. Were he honest, he would report himself in his personal assessment log. At the very least, he would mention it during the days of debriefings once "home." It could mean demerit, perhaps a desk and early retirement. But then, after a mission such as this, there could not be much left in a career; another shorter, maintenance trip command perhaps, but nothing to compare with this three-year journey to get a definitive angle on the Triad Galaxy recession.

The unmanned probe had failed; the project manager had been sacked, and the manned attempt had been revived despite the aftertaste of the Lusk disaster. In the wake of that, the unmanned failure gave Stafford grim satisfaction. Any setback to the unmanned advocates was fine with him and his fellow officers, who stood at the club bar and cheered one another by recounting details of unmanned failures.

"A hand, guided by an eye, connected to a brain," they'd repeat, an early space age adage that had become sacred to the pilots, the more revered as manned flights became more infrequent with the ascendancy of the unmanned constituency.

Each side had its apogees and perigees. Lying there, the pictures folded on his chest, Stafford recalled the pilot's perigee, the nightmare of Colonel Lusk, the one that sent the unmanned advocates into paroxysms of joy and — if they attended any bars, which was doubtful — into rounds of merriment. "The Lusk Fiasco" it came to be known. It was the same mission as Stafford's: to reach that point in space where the Triad recession could be measured against the easily ascertained values obtained from near space. "Lusk," he thought. "Poor bastard."

Lusk had been ahead of him in command school and had commanded several interplanetary missions without flaw or fault. "A comer," they had said. And then the Triad trip. Three years out and blooey. Lusk had blown it all.

The final report was still classified, but hell, nothing like that stays quiet.

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The essence of the final was known around the club, like the venality and gutlessness of the unmanned constituency. Lusk had gotten there, taken the measurements as planned, made all the runs and then *dumped*. Yes, *dumped* all that priceless data! And for what? Here the stories diverged. But, according to those who had transcribed the debriefings, Lusk had dumped the data in order to get something else in the tapes and bubbles.

The sensors, Lusk reportedly insisted, had picked up something else, something more important. So he had made a command decision to unload the banks, which were filled with the Triad goodies, and go after the new material. One version said the new something was acoustical as well as visual, so Lusk had even retracked the onboard audio system to pick it up. Needless to say, Lusk had returned with an empty bank and a sullen crew. Stafford was there the day of the landing, and he could not forget the sight of Lusk walking resolutely and alone to the pad transporter, helmet under his arm as if he had been guillotined already.

Major Stafford flew with the burden of knowing that his mission could redeem the manned concept or doom it. The night before his preflight-quarantine, when he met his fellow officers in the club, it was more than farewell. It was benediction from all of them, benediction in the long silences between toasts. The back-clapping was tender, reverential, and when he left for quarters, he left alone and knew his fellow pilots would drink fearfully into the night. He was concerned with the burden he bore for them. The more startled then, when he rounded the corner of his dorm and ran, literally, into Lusk.

Specterlike, Lusk held up a hand and whispered, "Only a moment, Major. Please."

Stafford hadn't wanted this. He had barely spoken to Lusk since his return in disgrace. Ever since, Lusk had trained alone, aimlessly, awaiting reassignment. He had slackened off until a mid-forties thickness formed at his waist and he wore his tie loosely at his collar. But it was not a night for cruelty. It was a night for generosity, as if largeness would add a measure of confidence to his mission. Stafford stopped there in the darkness at his dorm door.

"What?"

Lusk held out a packet tied in ribbon. "Take these along, Major. Never mind them now. But on the way out — well, just give them a look, time permitting."

Stafford protested. "You know the mission rules. No unauthorized documents—"

"It's not mission material," Lusk said. "It's for your personal ditty bag."

"But you know how full that gets, Lusk. Souvenirs, pictures—"

Lusk pressed him. "Major, please. Consider it." He lowered his voice,

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though there was no one to overhear. "There is something here you will need. Something which, if I had had it, would have made all the difference. It's crucial, Stafford."

Lusk had pressed the packet into Stafford's hand, muttered a thanks and good luck, and disappeared. And when he packed his ditty bag for the mission, Stafford had included Lusk's packet.

Stafford saw the packet nearly every time he fished in the personal bag during the night rest period, but he never took it out. Instead, he went through his routine with the pictures and then played the audiocassette Lorraine had given him before he left. Somehow it was more satisfying than the videocassette supplied by the agency. The video was of Lorraine and their son performing little paradigms before the camera, smiling self-consciously, playing, blowing kisses, and reciting banalities. For a year Stafford played the videocassette every night period, but he slept with the audiotape playing softly at his ear. Gradually, the repetition of the video became unnerving. He knew each move, noticed each fleck as the tape began to wear. One night Stafford decided what was wrong. "They are not they anymore. The boy is a year older, and so is Lorraine. They are not *they* anymore." He was seized by a longing for real time as never before in his life, a desire to be back, in *their* time, seeing as they were at that moment.

It was then that the psych training came in handy. Strong desire is to be avoided on long space missions, especially that rooted at home. Strong emotions are to be checked, save that humming undercurrent of ego which is survival itself. In time, he put away the videocassette and listened only to the audiotape of Lorraine. Lorraine recounting their first meeting, their early days together, how much they had, and would have upon his return. She had been careful not to dwell on their separation. Instead, she hewed carefully to how much they had and would have. It was comfort, a warbling womb into which he fell each night period in search of sleep.

He was nearly asleep now, the photos on his chest, her tape crooning in his ear, when he became aware of the arrhythmia warning light on the bio panel overhead, winking to a soft *beep*. It was telling him of cardiac irregularity. It was not an unusual occurrence. Prolonged weightlessness frequently produced arrhythmia as a companion to slowed heart rates. Each member of the crew had experienced it at least a couple of times. Usually, mere awareness of it was enough to trigger sufficient adrenalin into the system to trim it up again. As dispassionately as he could, he pressed for the display. His readout showed an accelerated rate as well as irregularity. Pressure was O.K., well within limits.

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Stafford sat up. Why an accelerated rate when he was on the brink of sleep? Was it because the mission was nearing climax, approaching the critical field? He rejected that possibility. He was trained and confident. He steadied his mind, remembered his training, and sifted back in time. He reviewed the day, looking for anomalies, up through retiring, the ditty bag opening, the pictures, the playing of Lorraine's tape. He'd missed something. He went back, through the ditty bag opening. He made a mental stop. That was it. For the first time on the mission, he had considered getting out the Lusk packet. The decision deferred had stuck in his subconscious like a burr, and he had rolled on it in his presleep.

He fished out Lusk's packet and untied it. There were some microfilm strips and a little audio reel. That was all. He slid the strips into the overhead projector. Old and splotchy, but still recognizable, was a service record, one from the old pre-Agreement files. A Navy Lieutenant Edward Greer. Birth date, 1935. Lawrence, Kansas, before the states were made regions and sectors. Annapolis. Pawtucket. A series of assignments. Some typos here and there. Stafford smiled: those old clerk-typists were now making the same mistakes on computer screens. The last assignment: Southeast Asian Theater, a carrier and MIA, April 15, 1965.

He injected another strip, and the projector displayed a two-shot from a college yearbook, the *Buffalo*. "Laurie and Eddie," the caption read. "The couple most likely to." Next was a photocopy from a courthouse record book: "Know all by these present—" the rest unreadable, with watermarks, until the names, "Edward Greer and Laurie Adams," with signatures and the date, in 1957, still legible. That was all.

Lusk obviously was not a well man. Why in hell would he be lugging around the vital records of some old couple from the nineteen-hundreds? It couldn't be sentiment. The services had long since been combined, and under the Agreement, the conflict Greer was involved in was an undeclared misunderstanding barely referred to in the military history courses at Command School.

Stafford moved the strip to the last shot. It was a handwritten note: "Stafford. Listen. Lusk." Listen to what? The tape, of course. Stafford had a notion not to be led any further. His training told him to avoid diversion, blind alleys, mission-unrelated matters. He watched his arrhythmia light beeping ever so faintly. He would calm down. He would rest, if not sleep. But just to put it all at bay and out of mind, he put the little reel on the playback.

A violin section from another era began to play. It was music, a little scratchy, but the words were easily audible when a quartet began to sing:

Sweetheart, if you should stray,

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A million miles away,
I'll always be in love with you....

It wound on. A wistful tune, Stafford thought.

I wish you happiness.
As for me, Sweetheart, I guess,
I'll always be in love with you....

Simple, straightforward, Stafford thought. He rewound Lusk's tape and put it and the microfilm strips back in the packet. He switched off his personal light and lay back, pulled by the restraints onto his pallet. The arrhythmia light went out.

He lay listening to the occasional thump of the attitude thrusters maintaining the ship, and the ear of his mind replayed the little tune "I'll Always Be in Love with You."

He was humming fragments of the tune when he took the bridge after his rest period and initiated the sequence that would lead them into the final phase. He gave the crew a little pep talk, impressing upon them that they were about to play a role in exploration no less a benchmark than Magellan's or Gagarin's. Listening to himself, he thought: *If Dr. Lowenwalter is right and the Triad recession fits his hypothesis, then his Unity Theory will be airtight, his published material will become gospel. This Triad information should assure him the Grand Award, the prize granted every decade to the scientist who did the most to advance understanding of the universe.*

But Stafford shared with the other pilots of his group a disdain for scientists like Lowenwalter that stemmed from a suspicion that the learned men were somehow in league with the unmanned constituency. The scientists did little to dispel the suspicion, often treating the pilots as little more than servant-automatons. With mock patience, they would explain the essentials of a mission, affecting parent-child modes of instruction that galled men like Stafford who, after all, had the equivalent of Ph.D.'s themselves in navigation and engineering and who, unlike their mentors in physics, understood the arts of authority.

"Put that prissy bastard Lowenwalter in command of a ship," they'd say at the club bar, "and you'd see how far he'd get. Let him fix an IMU when the platform is screwing up. Let him figure out what to do when half the crew's dosimeters go off the scale."

There'd be cries of assent. "Yeah, and see what he and that gang of pipe-suckers would do if—" And the most complex mission rule benders would be conjured up, climaxed by the cap shot: that it was a pilot-engineer who devised the ship's probe, the charged auger that preceded the craft in space and permitted multi-Mach speed by deflecting or absorbing space particles which otherwise would grind the ship to bits.

Yet, in quiet periods, there were moments of truce, induced by a mutual

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understanding of the limits on each side and the ultimate truth — that some are destined to dream and some are destined to do — and that between the two there is an eternally shared symbiotic need.

For three Earth-measured days Stafford put the crew to the test, warming up and calibrating the equipment. The near-dormant spacecraft was powered up for the occasion, and with the exception of troubleshooting four balky heat exchangers, it had gone well. The sensors were sharp. Stafford worked the crew like a symphony conductor, exhorting here, cajoling there. The mission work-rest cycle had been warped to allow no rest during the span of criticality, but when the spacecraft entered the field, Stafford had them at cutting edge, in fine-tune mode like the attitude control. For a period of three Earth hours the sensors would look out at the Triad Galaxy and measure its unique travel against the known values of its neighbors. Every measurable quantity and the quality thereof would be sampled.

Stafford watched as the digits flew from the criticality clock, flickering down to zeroes, replaced instantly by a pulsing amber display. "We are here," he said.

The science engineer reported regularly. Some data from one ultraviolet receptor may have been compromised, he said, but Stafford agreed it was no great loss, with the redundancy on board. Other star fields swung slowly across the viewing ports as the craft yawed to maintain the Triad as its target. The fields spun in the windows as the thrusters rolled the craft to utilize the sensors mounted under and aft.

"Eighty percent complete," reported the science engineer. "Looking good."

The onboard experiments clock was filling up with numbers. Soon it would be done. Stafford rechecked the guidance commands for the loop which would bring them about. All balls, he noted. No discrepancy between the programmed maneuver and that computed on board. He preset the loop commands. In the space of one hour, Earth-measured, they would be heading home.

Stafford mouthed that word *home*, tasting the expiration of the *h* in his mouth as it slid past his teeth. For an instant he assumed that it was he who was humming it, that little tune, and he half smiled to think that he had remembered it so clearly and in the midst of such absorbing activity.

"I wish you happiness."

He clapped the guidance engineer on the shoulder. "It will be good—"

"But for me, sweetheart, I guess..."

"What?" Stafford chucked Guidance once more on the back. "You what?"

Guidance had his head cocked, looking warily at Stafford. Slowly, he shook his head.

"I'll always be in love with you."

It wasn't Guidance singing. Stafford swung around the bridge. It wasn't any of them.

"Hold!" Stafford cried. The crew,

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eight on the bridge and five on the subsystems consoles, turned as if to obey a command.

It continued. No violins. Just two voices, singing a cappella. Untrained, yet sweet voices, singing "I'll Always Be in Love with You."

He summoned the science engineer from the operations deck below.

"Hear something?" Stafford asked.

"Just that song."

"What song?"

"Your song, on the Ent."

"I'm not playing any song!"

"Sure you are. On the onboard entertainment circuit. I hear it."

"There's no onboard on," said Stafford.

"Well, that's just dumb. I hear it. You do, too, don't you?"

"A million miles away...."

"There's no music being played on the Ent," Stafford said. "There's no frigging music here at all."

"You deaf? I hear it. You hear it."

Of course Stafford heard it. A man and a woman, a duet. Not polished, but charming in its untrained roughness, as if he and Lorraine on a picnic might—

The science engineer was Lowenwalter's boy, baby-faced but surefooted as hell. But now he was not sure. "That's not the onboard?"

"Absolutely nubba."

Science screwed up his face. "You know, in the middle of the run, I got some squiggle."

"Squiggle?"

"Yes. Some over-mod from one bank, the balance that it monitored."

"That sound," said Stafford. "Is it palpable? I mean, really here. Or do we just hear it? What do we have left?"

"The banks are full, Major, loaded."

"Give me an audio and volume. Put it through the Ent."

In a moment the sound they were hearing was amplified on the Ent, confirmed on the needles and reconfirmed when Stafford had the tech wow the gain up and down.

Stafford moved to the command ring on the bridge. "I want optical," he ordered.

"Little screens? Below?"

"No. Up here, on the big one." Stafford ordered the main screen.

The science engineer hesitated. "Mission rules—"

"Full optics," said Stafford. "Up there. Now."

The voices continued their song of plighted love. The bridge crew remained transfixed. Stafford mentally riffed through possible reasons. Fatigue hypnosis? Mission-ended malaise? None of the book stuff fit. The return commands had been cranked in, and the spacecraft was about to respond and describe a vast wind in the heavens.

"Now?" came the science enginner from below.

"Now."

Hash splattered on the screen. Undecipherable hash, and then, with the clarity of decanted wine, the face of a woman appeared. She was singing:

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"As for me, sweetheart, I guess—"

The image of a man joined hers, and he sang the lead as her voice diminished:

"I'll always be in love with you."

Stafford didn't need to look closely. He knew who they were. They were Lusk's figures, except that the woman was some years older and the man was wearing a tattered flight suit, the lieutenant bars barely visible. The man was much older, hollow-eyes, with a mournful mouth that twisted as he sang.

"Science," Stafford. "I want this."

"Major, the banks are full."

"Then, dump something, rerack and get this."

"I'll need an order."

"You have it."

"A written—"

"You'll get one. *Get this.*"

She reappeared and resumed the lead. Looking at her, Stafford instinctively admired her. Wise and forgiving, he thought, and strong. The music softly died. Her countenance softened.

"I waited," she said on the screen.

"And I waited," Greer's image said. "And longed."

"It was so long," she sighed.

"I know. For me, too."

"The moon. Did you?"

He smiled, a snagtoothed grin. "Of course. When Hanoi had a moon, I saw it."

"And—"

"And I thought, that moon, my Laurie has seen it, too."

"We always said we would."

"Yes, we promised we'd look at the moon and each would know the other was looking, too."

"I love you, Eddie."

"I love you, Laurie, forever."

"Science," cried Stafford. "Are you getting this?"

From below, the science engineer said, "I'm getting it, but we're losing the other—"

"Dump what you have to—"

"Dumped a lot already."

"You know," she was saying, "Grandpa and Grandma did it in the First World War. She'd go out and look up at the moon and she'd know wherever he was, he'd be looking, too. No matter how far apart they were, they knew they were looking at the same moon, having the same thoughts. I love you, Eddie."

"I love you, Laurie."

"I'm so sorry—"

Stafford whispered in his headset. "Get this. All of it."

Science whispered back in desparation. "Getting all. But losing other stuff, Major."

"Get *this*."

The lieutenant's voice tired as he said, "I am sorry, too, Laurie, that I couldn't have done better, lasted longer. I was banged up punching out and—"

"Honey, I know. I know that. It's all right." Each crewman was nodding appreciation at that soothing, forgiving voice. "It's all right, Eddie. I know,

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I waited. And we're here."

"I love you, Laurie."

"And I love you."

They began the song once more: *"Sweetheart, if you should stray—"*

Stafford asked again on his headset, "Get that, Science?"

The science engineer was back on the bridge beside him. "We rolled on all of it. Everything."

The navigator announced, "We're into the turnaround. We're heading back."

Stafford clapped him on the back. "God," he said, "that'll be good."

"Sir?"

"Yes."

"What was this?"

"Not sure, Nav."

"We in trouble?"

"Depends," said Stafford. "Perhaps not."

When the turn had been completed and the course computer confirmed it, Stafford left the bridge for his quarters. One of the first tasks was to write orders to the science engineer restating his verbal commands. He summoned Science to deliver them in person. Science accepted laconically. "Stay a moment," said Stafford. He looked at the young man, Lowenwalter's lad. "What do you think?" asked Stafford.

"This far out, this long, I don't know. I wouldn't trust what I thought too much. Or is that what you mean?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought, perhaps, you meant what do I think of this." Science tapped the written orders in his jacket.

"Well, then, what do you think of the ... decision?"

"I think, Major, you've got a year to think about it."

During the return, Stafford spent much of his time in quarters writing in longhand, as well as working on his mission notes. The longhand material he deposited in his ditty bag.

Once, during a stretch of elastic boredom, a senior crew member approached Stafford on the bridge with the formal request that the tape bank, the visual/audio, be played. Stafford declined and read the mission rule to the crew on the main intercom. Once the turn has been made, the tape banks shall be sealed, to be opened only by the appropriate agency officials upon return.

Aside from that, until the plane of Uranus had been breached and the Mach reduced, the shipboard routine had been an unbroken, unrelieved ribbon of time, parsed only by the artificially induced periods of activity and rest. When the orbit of Uranus was crossed, Stafford sent a coded message to Earth which, unlike any others, would reach the destination before the ship.

The agency director and Lowenwalter were among those present for touchdown along with the families of the crew. Like Lusk, Stafford walked helmet under arm, alone to the pad transporter.

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When he was in the quarantine "bug," they brought in Lorraine and his son, the latter diffident and uncertain, Lorraine eager and alarmed in her urgent desire to reestablish. Stafford smiled and spoke reassuringly through the intercom. At one point he said, "Son. Look at me." The still-young boy looked up.

"I am your father," Stafford said. "And I love you."

The boy looked at him and nodded.

"I love you," he said simply to Lorraine, who was struggling with the mien designated for wives of command pilots, prescribed by the manuals and the courses which were given as earnestly as those for childbirth.

"Oh, dear," she said. "And I love you, Jimmie."

It was the first time in three years that he had heard his given name, let alone its diminutive, and he smiled, embarrassed.

"Well," he said. "You just remember that."

Stafford insisted on his prerogative not to be debriefed through the intercom, and his quarantine was abbreviated. They set up a bio-screen and they talked through that. They, the mission committee, went by the books, listening to his recollection of preflight prep, crew ingress, countdown, lift-off, and the several slingshot maneuvers that set the craft on course. They took him step by step through the approach to the optimum tracking field, comparing his random mental recollections with his mission notes. Occasionally, they would stop the interrogation and ask, "Any collateral material?" He would respond, "Nothing relevant," until they got to the activation for the arrival at the field. Then he asked that the screen be removed. It was, and he talked to them, face to face.

"Collateral material," he said. "During rest periods, after a time, I omitted the use of the agency-supplied family video and utilized some audio material included by my wife. That is sort of precursor to what follows. In my ditty bag, my personal effects, I took some historical material supplied me by Colonel Lusk, who, as you know, made a mission previous to mine. I looked at it, listened to the audio portion of it. It made no particular impression upon me until we reached the period of criticality, the field. Gentlemen, to save time, may I ask a rather simple question?"

The agency director responded. "We have monitored the tape banks, of course—"

"Well, then, you know—"

"Know what?"

"Know why I dumped. And why Lusk dumped. The hell with the Triad recession — this is something so big, so stunning—"

Stafford scanned their faces for acknowledgment, a scintilla of understanding. He leaned forward, "You did view the tapes?"

Dr. Lowenwalter answered for

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them. "Yes, of course. Except for some hash here and there, they were blank. Computer enhancement does nothing, not even for the hash. You have returned with hash, Stafford."

"Hash, Stafford." His name went thusly into the annals of flight history as recounted at the bars and seminars, the places where it really counted. His crew was reassigned to the back rooms in subaltern jobs at Mission Control, and gradually they would smile and recall the "trick," the mass hysteria induced by an auto-suggestive commander whose sway could not be resisted on a course that long. When he saw them on his rounds, they would drop their gaze, and after a time, he stopped trying to establish eye contact. It was a point of personal pride that Stafford return to the Launch Complex to gather his personal belongings from the crew quarters. He forced himself to go to the club. He bought a round for the house. They looked into their glasses as he raised his and said, "To Edward Greer and Laurie Adams." Some drank with him. Some did not.

Stafford opted to serve out his active time in Mozam, a monitoring station near the equatorial launch plane. He was an environmental engineer for the computer room, nothing asked or given. Occasionally, he received a telexed message from Lusk over in the Seychelles, which were still a trifle hot from a nuclear abort seventy years previous, but habitable for those whose procreative plans were over.

"Remember," Lusk would type, "if you should stray."

"Sure," Stafford would reply, "a million miles away."

Another part of their shared recall was Stafford's last encounter with Lowenwalter, which he'd managed to relate to Lusk during a leave Lusk took on Mozam.

Stafford was on his way out of the Mission Complex, transfer papers in hand, when he caught up with Lowenwalter on a walkway. Stafford had put his hand on the doctor's shoulder, turned him and said, "Sit down a minute, please."

On a sun-drenched bench in Texas, Stafford was dead calm.

"The tapes," he said. "You saw the tapes."

"Yes," said Lowenwalter. "I told you we saw them."

There was something in the manner in which Stafford maintained a meter's distance between them that made it the more dangerous. "What did you see?"

Lowenwalter blinked into the sun.

"I'm washed up, you know."

"Well," Lowenwalter said. "Of course."

"Of course what?"

"They were there, of course."

"They?"

"Those ... figments."

"Figments?"

"Remnants. I would say, remnants—"

"Remnants of what?"

"Perhaps of some past. As you

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know, Major, all events are someplace. It would seem that *that* past is far beyond where you were. I posit perhaps a warp — yes, a warp that could well reinforce, not negate, the hypothesis which you were sent to—" Dr. Lowenwalter stopped, on potentially dangerous ground. Seeing no threat, he resumed. "You are a pilot, Major; I am a scientist. You are romantic; I am pragmatic. Do you know something? I saw your tapes and it was all there. It was. It was a couple singing, pledging their affection to one another. The agency director and I saw all of that. We were alerted by your message from the Uranus plane, and we viewed the tapes in private."

Lowenwalter measured the distance between them. "We made the decision to erase them." He continued. "But do you know why it was that we erased them, made them neutral? Perhaps, after all, you do deserve to know." Lowenwalter closed his eyes to the sun. "It was because it doesn't matter, and in fact could be dangerous. Now, mind you, pay attention. It doesn't matter whatever that is out there. If two essences have managed to combine, it does not matter here. Could, in fact, be dangerous."

"Are you out of your—"

"No. Listen now to me. We will not talk again, I think. Civilization, such as it was, endured one such period of time in which earthly matters were subordinated to some imagined life beyond. Science, inquisitiveness, withered. It was called by subsequent historians the 'Dark Ages'."

"Dark?"

"Because there was no progress, no earthly progression, only looking ahead until that time when life would close. People refused to live in this world—"

"Wait a minute. Do you think that Eddie Greer and Laurie Adams didn't live in their world? Man, they lived in the very teeth of it. Listen, I've been studying up on that little 'undeclared misunderstanding' since I got back. Quarantine gives you plenty of time for that. That little beauty was a war that smart-assed guys like you never bothered to explain to the people who fought it. You with your computers and technology. It was a killer. And you know what it killed? It killed love. Wholesale slaughter. Half the pilots like Greer who finally did get back found their wives shacked up with the lawyers they'd hired to secure their benefits. But not Laurie. Not Eddie. They were strong. Sure, it killed them, too. But not what they had."

Lowenwalter blinked. "Stafford, we are managing an empirical Earth, delicately balanced. We have a renascence of knowlege, of curiosity."

"Curiosity? You, the curious scientist, erased those tapes, deprived our people of a singular piece of knowledge, these grunts busting their humps for your goddamn theories. And you lecture me about curiosity?"

Lowenwalter drew apart. "The

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tapes are blank, Stafford. Though they should have been filled with the proofs of the Unity Theory."

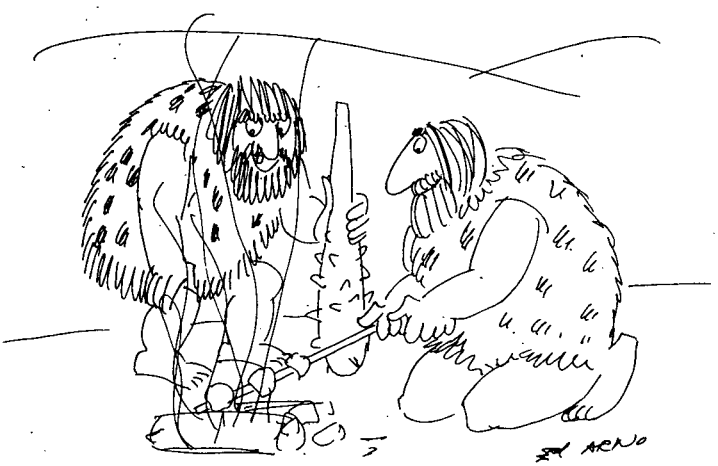
"Then tell me just one more thing — and you're right, we will not talk again. Why didn't Lusk's tapes show Eddie and Laurie? Did you erase those, too?"

The doctor sighed. "Oh, no. We didn't have to. Lusk probably saw what was ahead after he had lost the Triad data. He is a veteran of the program. So, he simply erased *everything* before he got back. I think, perhaps, he had more regard for his crew. He wanted them to succeed, to advance. So he, as you pilots sometimes say, 'took the rap'."

A pace down the walk, Stafford turned and said to Lowenwalter, "You know, you missed the obvious in those tapes, my learned friend. That was no remnant of some past time. That is still going on, right now, and will be tomorrow."

So it was that Stafford contented himself with his majority, never bucked for colonel, which should have been automatic with completed missions of that magnitude. He played his perfunctory role in the computer room when the unmanned probe was launched on the Triad Mission.

When Lorraine and his son joined him in Mozam, he took to running the beaches and building them fires in the star-fired nights, and bringing them ever so close.



"The discovery of fire will assure your place in history, but the discovery of marshmallows will assure your place in the hearts of your contemporaries."

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In which a young musician for the New York Philharmonic finds herself transported, quite suddenly and literally, into a nightmare...

All the Dogs of Europe

BY

BARBARA PAUL

Two feet, one at the end of each leg, walking along a dry sidewalk. So why did she feel she was swimming?

The peculiar wintry light was beginning to fade: late afternoon. An elderly gentleman in olive corduroy trousers was approaching from the opposite direction. *"Gnädige Frau."*

"Guten Tag," she answered automatically and passed on by.

She was wearing the only pair of high-heeled shoes she owned, stiltlike things that threw her body forward out of its normal skeletal alignment; lots of back trouble later on if she wore them much. Oddly, the heels made no sound on the sidewalk.

The "swimming" feeling persisted. The street ended at a square, a small one. The shop buildings around the square were also small, and provincial-looking; the streets leading off in various directions were all narrow. A village square, then, not one neighborhood of a large town. In the distance a mountain loomed, barely visible in the growing twilight. Lovely.

But she was in no mood to dwell on the aesthetics of her surroundings. In the center of the square was a fountain, dry this time of year. She "swam" her way over and sat down on the rim. If her head weren't so cobwebby. ... a chill ran down her back and arms; getting cold, she should be indoors. But where?

Not amnesia — that was for bad movies. Besides, she knew her name, her profession, her address. (Andrea Caldwell, cellist, New York City.) Partial amnesia? She certainly didn't remember how she got *here*. Wherever "here" was.

Andrea twisted around and looked up at the statue in the center of the dry

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fountain. A man in romanticized attitude, a baton in his hand — conducting an invisible orchestra in this tiny little village square. Mozart, Haydn, somebody; whoever the poor man was, the sculptor had put him into one of those incredibly swish postures so popular in pseudobaroque statuary. This had to be Austria — where else could you find such a statue in a village square?

A man came out of a shop that had the sign *"Metzgerei"* painted on the window. He locked the door and left. Andrea glanced at her watch: five o'clock. Kind of early for the butcher to be going home.

Someone else thought so, too, a middle-aged woman who had approached without Andrea's seeing her. *"Hans geht frühzeitig nach Hause."*

"Ja," Andrea agreed. *"Vielleicht ist er krank?"* But he hadn't looked sick.

"Hans?" The other woman snorted. *"Niemals."* She nodded familiarly and went her way.

That woman knows me, Andrea thought. *She knows me and she doesn't see anything odd about my being here.* She started to call out after the retreating figure but hesitated. What could she say? *Excuse me, would you please tell me where I am and how I got here?* If only the cobwebs in her head would clear. ...

...and then they did clear, a little, just enough to produce a restricting band around her chest. She realized something that terrified her. That little encounter she'd just had with the woman who seemed to know her — nothing especially remarkable about it, just two women wondering why the butcher had closed up shop early.

Except that the conversation had been in German, and Andrea didn't speak German.

She had to wait until the tightness in her chest had eased a little, enough for her to breathe normally again. Amnesia, she'd thought, was supposed to be of short duration. Yet she'd been here long enough to learn the language — and to be accepted as part of the village life. She looked down at her high-heeled shoes: they still looked new. She ran her thumb over the four fingers of her left hand; the tips were calloused, toughened from years of pressing down hard on the heavy cello strings. That meant she'd been playing recently, or at least she hadn't been away from her instrument long enough for her fingertips to start to soften.

Where was her cello? she wondered anxiously. Such a temperamental instrument — it had to be handled right, stored so carefully. One problem she always had was convincing would-be helpful men that she really didn't want them to carry her cello for her, that it had to be held just so—

Stop it. She was deliberately avoiding thinking about the problem.

Enumerate. I am in a small village where German is spoken. I understand the language when it is spoken to me and I can answer in kind. I can also

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read it: I knew *Metzgerei* meant "butcher shop." I don't remember coming here, and I don't know *why* I'm here. I have no money, and I don't know where I'm going to sleep tonight, and it's getting cold.

This was ridiculous. Ask somebody. She got to her feet and started across the square. Again, she felt as if she were swimming, pushing against some heavier-than-air resistance that slowed her down. Something was happening to her peripheral vision, too: she could see only straight ahead. There was no sound.

And then all of a sudden there *was* sound, a lot of it — footsteps, excited voices, a nervous laugh or two. Fast-moving streaks of color that turned into solid bodies jostling up against hers, pushing her along with the crowd. The square — which had been deserted only a minute ago — was now packed with pushing, eager people, all trying to peer over one another's shoulders, all trying to see ... what? A flashy red sports car, of all things, with two people in it, a man and a woman.

"My goodness!" Andrea said aloud. "It's DiDi What's Her Name!" An American television glitter girl, an immensely popular sexual fantasy figure — DiDi Moran, that was it. A throat-catchingly beautiful woman, so close to everybody's idea of physical perfection that Andrea sometimes suspected DiDi Moran was computer-generated. But there she was in the flesh, as alive and as real as Andrea herself.

But then Andrea realized it wasn't DiDi the crowd was pushing to see, but the man she was with. A dark-haired, ordinary-seeming man — he looked vaguely familiar, but Andrea couldn't place him.

"Heidi! Heidi!" a young voice called over the murmur of the crowd.

The crowd was excited, trying to touch the man in the sports car, almost fawning over him. But what surprised Andrea was the way DiDi the Superstar was behaving — *clinging* to the man, just like any moonstruck schoolgirl, gazing on this ordinary person with open adulation. DiDi Moran was doing exactly what every red-blooded male in North America and Europe had often dreamed of her doing. She was telling the world that the hitherto unattainable sex object had been conquered; she was announcing her surrender. The man looked more than a little smug.

Andrea felt a tug at her skirt and looked down to see a small boy frowning up at her, exasperation written on his round little face. *"Heidi! Hörst du nicht?"*

Now what was this? *"Wa' sagst?"*

"You better come home right now," the boy said in German. "You know how Mother gets when she has to wait supper. Come on, Heidi — don't just stand there!"

Well, it seemed she did belong someplace after all. She followed the boy out of the crowd, hoping he'd lead her to a few answers. But what was

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this *Heidi* business? Heidi was a little girl in the Swiss Alps who was taken away from her grandfather. Heidi was Shirley Temple being cute.

No swimming feeling now. Andrea skimmed along rapidly after the boy, her feet barely touching the ground. "Hey, wait up!" she called after him. "What's the hurry?"

The look he threw back over his shoulder was one of undisguised resentment. "I don't like getting yelled at. She always yells at *me* when she's mad at *you*."

There had to be reason for all this, Andrea told herself. *Just don't panic.*

The house the boy led her to was "quaint" on the outside, bland inside. Andrea barely had time to notice the stout man sitting by the iron stove before an equally stout woman appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Where have you been?" the woman demanded in German, in a voice so loud Andrea flinched. "Heidi, I don't know what we're going to do with you! Come help me — don't dawdle!" She disappeared through the door.

An old phonograph was playing. Andrea glanced uncertainly at the overweight man, whose head was nodding in time to the music; he paid no attention to her. She went into the kitchen.

The woman started in again. "Heidi, how can you be so selfish? You think of no one but yourself, what *you* want, what *you* like! Here — carry those in." She pointed to two bowls, one of rice and the other of noodles.

Rice *and* noodles? Andrea used hot pads to pick up the heavy bowl of noodles, and she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the kitchen window. Same old Andrea Caldwell she'd always been; she'd halfway expected to see herself transformed into someone named Heidi, evidently the daughter in this not exactly love-filled household.

The round-face boy was already seated at the table, eager to get started. The man was playing a sentimental Richard Tauber record: *Wien, Wien, nur du allein sollst steht die Stadt meiner Traüme sein.* Vienna, city of my dreams.

"How far is it to Vienna?" Andrea asked as casually as she could.

With startling results. The man turned off the phonograph and glared at her angrily. The woman placed both fists on her hips and glared at her angrily. "Oh, not again!" the round-faced boy groaned. And glared at her angrily.

"It's exactly as far as it was the last time you tried running away," the woman snapped. "I told you before, you won't be able to come waltzing back home next time when things don't go to your liking *out there!*"

What malice was in the woman's voice! The man muttered something to her, of which Andrea caught only the German word for *doctor* and *patience.* Had she — ah, had this *Heidi* — been sick then? Sick in the head, maybe?

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"*You're* not here with her all day!" the woman growled at the man. No one said anything for a long moment. Then: "The food's getting cold. Everybody sit down."

Andrea guessed correctly that her chair was the one opposite the round-faced boy. If Heidi had tried to run away from home and they were afraid she'd try again, then she must still be a young girl. Andrea Caldwell was twenty-nine years old and considered grown up by everybody who knew her.

She caught the eye of the boy across the table. "Do you see anything different about me? Do I look the same to you?"

"You look like crazy Heidi Krause," he said nastily.

"Franzl," his father said with a frown, but there was no real reprimand in it.

Crazy Heidi Krause — that was the role she'd been cast in? A young girl with mental or emotional problems who was an embarrassment to her family? Not one of the other three at the table had shown any particular concern for her well-being. They were ashamed of her.

The plate in front of Andrea was piled high with schnitzel, rice, and noodles. A bowl nearby held some sort of mystery meat swimming in brown gravy — last night's leftovers? Another bowl held potato dumplings. Starch and grease, not a green vegetable in sight. There was a tomato salad, though; Andrea helped herself.

"Look at her!" the mother of the family sneered. "Turning up her nose at good food — so afraid she'll put on a little weight! What a vain child you are, Heidi."

Andrea put down her fork; this had gone far enough. "Listen to me, all of you. Listen carefully. I don't belong here. I'm not Heidi Krause. My name is Andrea Caldwell, and I'm a cellist with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. I have no explanation for what's happened here, but I'm not who you think I am."

The boy Franzl made a puking sound, and the mother rolled her eyes heavenward. "Now she's a cellist!"

The father sighed to show how patient he was being. "Heidi, do you remember the Christmas pageant last year? The part where all the schoolchildren came together to sing? They asked you just to mouth the words because you're tone-deaf and can't carry a tune. *You're tone-deaf*, Heidi. How could you be a cellist?"

"You are not listening to me," Andrea said. "I'm not your daughter."

Suddenly her cheek was stinging hotly; it took her a moment to realize her face had just been slapped. "How *dare* you say such a thing!" The mother was leaning toward her, her face red.

"Frau Krause—"

"Frau Krause, is it? So now I'm Frau Krause? What happened to *Mutti*? Heidi, you must stop this."

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The father was saying something; young Franzl was hooting at her. Andrea dropped her head into her hands. It had finally caught up with her. Voices flowed in and out of her hearing; the details of her surroundings blurred into indistinguishable gray lumps. The violent dislocation in person and place, the lack of any logical explanation for this madness, the hostility of the people she found herself among — it all just got to her. She started shuddering, gasping for breath.

What a nightmare. Eventually the other three stopped yammering at her. A little later, Andrea was lying in bed, the Krause woman making perfunctory comforting noises as she pulled up the covers. Of all the things she could have said ... Andrea asked, "Where is my cello?"

"Oh, Heidi." The woman no longer sounded angry, merely tired of it all. "There is no cello. Try to understand. You don't know how to play any musical instrument. It's all in your head — you're imagining it."

"No cello?"

"No. What would you do with a cello? You've never even touched a cello so far as I know. Now go to sleep. Maybe your head will be clearer in the morning." She turned out the light and left the bedroom.

You've never even touched a cello.

Andrea lay quietly in the dark, her thumb running over the calloused tips of the fingers of her left hand, over and over again.

The stiltlike heels again. Late afternoon. Swimming down the sidewalk. An elderly gentleman wearing olive corduroy trousers was approaching from the opposite direction. *"Gnädige Frau."*

"Guten Tag," she answered automatically and passed on by.

Same old man she spoke to yesterday. But to him she was a *gnädige Frau,* while "at home" she was still a schoolgirl. Well, why not? Why look for consistency in a nightmare?

The last thing she remembered was lying in bed at the Krause house, touching her calluses to reassure herself she was indeed who she knew herself to be. She *knew* she was a professional musician, not some tone-deaf child who hadn't been allowed to sing in the Christmas pageant. Had Andrea Caldwell and Heidi Krause somehow been forced to swap places? (Don't think of *how.*) If so, where was the child now — at a rehearsal at Lincoln Center, wondering why everybody expected her to be able to play that enormous instrument she couldn't even hold up straight?

Andrea didn't remember getting up that morning, or how she'd spent the day ... nothing until she became aware of that swimming feeling as she headed toward the village square in her uncomfortable high-heeled shoes. A re-

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run? She was going to have to act out that ugly scene with the Krause family again?

Not this time. Instead of crossing to the fountain in the middle of the square, she turned right and approached a *Gasthof* — probably the only inn in the village. Andrea felt herself *commanded* to go into the *Gasthof*. Why? What was she supposed to do?

She felt a stab of panic as she pushed open the *Gasthof* door. Not willing it herself, she went inside — and found herself standing at the top of an open flight of stairs. Below was a capacious drinking room packed with people — mostly men, a few women. Loud talk, loud laughter. The room was hazy with cigarette and pipe smoke. Everyone seemed to be drinking either beer or that strange blend of white wine and lemonade that Austrians liked so much. (Now how did I know *that?* she wondered.)

The room's center of activity was right below the open stairway — someone holding court down there. A woman's blond head lifted, and the most beautiful face in the world looked up at her: DiDi Moran. The television star quickly looked away, as if not wanting to draw attention to Andrea's presence. But it didn't work; the man she was with — the same one as yesterday, the one who *almost* looked familiar — that man glanced up at Andrea and smiled.

And every other man in the place imitated him.

Andrea didn't like being the center of that kind of attention. There was something unpleasant about it, something snide. She suddenly realized why the staircase was open: so the men seated below could look up the skirts of the women coming down. And she was wearing a short skirt, a *very* short skirt. Andrea didn't even know she owned a skirt that short. (Well, that's what skirts were for: display. Which was why she wore trousers most of the time.)

Come down.

The command spoken inside her head was so authoritative that she had no choice but to obey. Hating it, she started her slow descent. Mustn't rush, make sure everybody gets a good look. The men smirked and mumbled to one another under their breath. Andrea wanted to go back, away from this place; but she was being *drawn* down, against her will. She resisted until her muscles ached, but she couldn't turn back.

So then she tried to hurry her descent, get it over with — but met the same kind of air resistance as when she was "swimming" in the street. It was like that childhood dream: she was stark naked and people were coming and she needed a place to hide and she tried to run, but she could move only so-o-o-o- s-l-o-w-l-y. Going down those stairs was like that. Down she went, down, until at last she reached the bottom. She gasped in relief. It was over.

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Only it wasn't.

She was back at the top of the stairs. How...? Good God, she was going to have to *do it again.*

Scared and dizzy with frustration, she started her second descent. The smirking men were calling out unintelligible remarks to her. The ordinary-looking man who was somehow at the center of it all was laughing, enjoying her embarrassment. But DiDi Moran was glaring at her with raw, blazing *hatred:* she was jealous.

That did it. In that instant of looking into DiDi Moran's hate-filled eyes, Andrea lost her feeling of humiliation and got mad, just plain mad. She tried to conjure up the German for "chickenprick," but couldn't. Just as well; answering sexual insult with sexual insult was only playing the game their way.

So she said nothing, but finished her descent with as much dignity as she could muster. She kept her eyes fixed on the man who seemed to be the leader of this mob. Her facial expression told him — and everybody else in the *Gasthof* — exactly what she thought of him.

He looked away.

Andrea stepped off the last stair and hurried to an empty table she'd spotted over against the wall. She sank down on the wooden bench, as out of breath as if she'd just rappelled down a mountainside.

When she'd had time to compose herself, she lifted her head and scrutinized the man who she felt certain was controlling her actions. He did look familiar. But something was a little out of kilter, not quite right ... something that kept her from recognizing him.

Right now he was talking to the other men crowded around his table. He was ignoring DiDi Moran completely, even though she was working hard to capture his attention. She stroked his chest, blew into his ear, played the same seductive game she played on television. To no avail. The man went on talking to his all-male audience, as if it weren't even worth his notice that a famous American television star was clinging to him all the while.

Then, even as Andrea watched, DiDi the Delicious let her attention wander. She gazed around the room, not looking at anything in particular. Her notice-me playfulness became automatic, slowed down, stopped. It lasted only a moment, but Andrea was sure she was reading absolute boredom in the other woman's face.

The man spoke sharply.

DiDi Moran started, looked guilty. Back to the chest-stroking and ear-blowing.

Well, well, Andrea thought. Things were not quite what they seemed in that department. Clearly DiDi Moran's job was to make the man look good, establish his right to cock-of-the-walk status in the male hierarchy of this place. But why was she doing it? Obviously she wasn't as enamored as she acted. Was DiDi Moran being forced

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to fawn over that man — the same way Andrea herself had been forced to make her exhibitionistic descent of the stairs? But then she remembered the look of utter hatred DiDi Moran had thrown her way — that was the look of a jealous woman, not a bored one. Which was true?

"Let's ask the professor," one of the men at the table said. Sounds of agreement answered the suggestion, and a couple of them started calling out for the "professor" to join them.

Professor? This little village had a university? Then Andrea remembered the centuries-old custom of calling any schoolmaster "professor"; his students might be only twelve years old, but he was still addressed as "professor."

"Professor! Are you coming?"

A slightly built man wearing thick glasses stood up from his seat in the corner and started making his way forward. Odd, Andrea thought, how in this strange place everyone started looking familiar. ... Good God! It was Syd. Sydney Grossinger, who played second oboe with the New York Philharmonic! It *was* Syd! Andrea wanted to jump and yell and wave her arms and shout his name — but an internal warning bell cautioned her that this was not the time. Wait. She forced herself to sit still and watch.

Everyone at the center table was calling Syd "professor," everyone except DiDi Moran, who was still concentrating on her sex-symbol role and didn't even acknowledge his arrival. The man at the center of it all was speaking. "The question has come up, Professor, of whether genetic engineering can breed out certain undesirable racial characteristics of a nonphysical nature. We're talking about deeply ingrained personality traits, like miserliness. What do you say, Professor?"

"What do you want me to say?" Syd asked mildly.

"Oh, come, Professor! Don't tell us you've not given it some thought. Weeding out those undesirable traits in your own race — of course you've wondered about it."

Andrea's mouth dropped open. *Jew baiting?!*

"I can't say that I have." Syd seemed undisturbed.

"You never think!" the other man said in a falsetto voice, obviously mocking. "That's what you used to say to me, Herr Professor! At least once a week — *You never think, Dummkopf!*"

"And you've never forgiven your old professor for it," Syd commented dryly.

The other man looked irritated. "Forgive? What do I have to forgive? *I'm* the one who went to America and made a success of myself. But you stayed here where you can go on bullying little boys."

"Ah well, he can't help it," another man at the table interposed. "Remember his ancestry."

"True, true." The first man was quickly placated. "When you come from a nation of drunken peasants,

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you can't be expected to behave like civilized folk . Did I ever tell you, Herr Professor, that my father was living in Vienna at the end of the Second World War? Did I ever tell you that?"

"Yes," said Syd.

"The Russian soldiers had never seen indoor plumbing before. Do you know what your conquering countrymen did? They drank water from the commode. They thought that was what it was for! Russians!" He spat on the floor. "Drunken peasants."

Syd said nothing; the other men at the table made tsk-tsking noises.

"But for you there may be hope, Professor," Syd's tormentor smirked. "Didn't you say only your maternal grandmother was Russian? Perhaps your Aryan half may still win out over your Russian half."

"I think that works out to one-fourth Russian," Syd said in a bored tone. "Not that it matters."

Andrea tuned them all out while she tried to think. They were baiting Syd not because of his Jewish heritage but because he was Russian? But Syd wasn't Russian — Andrea was sure he'd said his people had emigrated from Hamburg. So it must not be Syd himself who was the target of the racial slurs. Syd had been cast as the unknown man's old and hated schoolteacher, just as she was playing the role of Heidi Krause, whoever Heidi Krause was.

"No, I've never read Friedrich Wiess," Syd was saying in answer to a question.

"*Gott in Himmel.*" The central man sniggered and exchanged a patronizing look with the other men. "And you call yourself an educated man. I really am surprised you don't know his work, Professor."

"Oh, I'm so ashamed," Syd said deadpan.

It went on like that for a while, the almost-familiar man "proving" his superiority by belittling the "professor." Andrea was amazed at Syd, playing the goat with such equanimity. At last the man at the center of it all tired of the sport and dismissed his old adversary with a wave of his hand. Syd Grossinger started back to his seat in the corner.

"Syd!" Andrea hissed as loudly as she dared. "Over here! Syd!"

At first he didn't seem to realize that *Syd* meant him. Then he began searching the faces of those in the *Gasthof* with a not-quite-daring-to-hope look on his face.

Andrea waved an arm. "Over here, Syd — by the wall."

His expression was that of a man being thrown a lifeline. "Andrea? Andrea Caldwell? Is that you?"

"Yesssss!" she hissed, vigorously motioning him over.

In New York, Andrea Caldwell and Syd Grossinger had been casual acquaintances, professional musicians working together in the same orchestra. But on a wooden bench in the smoky main room of an Austrian *Gasthof*, they fell on each other like

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long-lost lovers. "My God, Andrea — it's really you! I'd just about resigned myself to being alone in this place forever ... damn, it's good to see you! I mean — I'm sorry you're trapped too, uh—"

"I know," Andrea said. "I felt the same way when I spotted you. How long have you been here, Syd?"

"Forever," he said bitterly. "At least it seems that way. God, it's good to hear English again! I don't really know how long I've been here, Andrea. Time doesn't seem to work quite the same way here."

"I've noticed," she said wryly. "Where is 'here'?"

"The village is called Pötzleinsdorf. It's about sixty kilometers southwest of Vienna, as near as I can figure it."

"Have you any idea how we got here? What's this all about?"

He shook his head. "All I know is that *he's* behind it." Syd gestured toward the smug man at the center table.

"Yes, I could tell he's running things — but who is he, Syd? He looks like somebody I ought to know, but I can't place him."

"You don't recognize him? He's on the custodial crew at Lincoln Center. You've seen him at rehearsals, dozens of times — he puts out the chairs and the music stands."

Andrea stared at the man in question. "Now that you mention it, he does look like one of those men — the one called Max or Karl or something Teutonic."

"Otto. Otto Schrag."

"Otto, that's it. But this guy only *looks* like Otto — there's something not quite right...."

"Try adding twenty years and about forty pounds. This is the younger, idealized Otto we've got here."

Andrea squinted her eyes. Yes, she could see the older, heavier custodian in the man here. "*That* is Otto's idealized version of himself?"

Syd grinned crookedly. "Doesn't have much imagination, does he? And the greatest thing Otto Schrag can dream up for himself is coming back home to show off. A rich, successful man with a glamorous woman worshipping at his feet. He must have been a real nobody here."

"What about her? DiDi Moran. Have you talked to her?"

"I tried to, but she doesn't speak German."

Andrea stared at him incredulously. "Then why didn't you speak to her in English?"

A look of utter confusion passed over Syd's face. "My God — I don't know, Andrea! *I never even thought of it.*"

She patted his arm. "Relax. That just means Otto doesn't want you talking to her. He can control us in all sorts of ways. Syd, how long have you been able to speak German?"

"All my life. Why?"

"Well, I can't speak it at all. I mean I can *now*, here. But never before."

Syd frowned. "You mean all of a

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sudden you *can* speak the language?"

"That's right. The role Otto has planned for me requires me to know German. Syd. Do you realize what we're doing? We're sitting here talking about some custodian's fantasy life and our own roles in it as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world. We've been plucked up out of our lives — physically, actually — and forced to do what this man wants us to do. Have we been drugged, hypnotized? This is crazy!"

"I know. Believe me, I know."

"I want to get out of this beer parlor — I need some fresh air. Can we go? Will he let us?"

"I can go — I've finished my shtick for the night. But you, I don't know what you're here for."

"I think I've already done what's required of me. Did you see the entrance I made?"

"No."

"Come on, then. I'll tell you about it outside."

They made their way among the tables and up the stairs without incident; no one paid attention to their going. Outside, the temperature had dropped.

"Brrr," Andrea said. "Do you have someplace to stay?"

"Yes, the professor's house. Everyone seems agreed that's where I belong."

"Then let's go there. I don't want to spend another night in the Krause household if I can avoid it."

"Krause?"

As they walked Andrea told him everything that had happened to her from the time she first "swam" into the village square up to her descent of the *Gasthof* stairs. "I'm missing most of today. As if I didn't exist until I walked into that *Gasthof*."

"And you're supposed to be this Heidi Krause? Who is she?"

"Beats me. Otto's hometown girlfriend maybe. She's just a schoolgirl."

"But Otto picked you to play the role. Why? Andrea, did you talk to Otto much back in New York?"

"No, we never spoke beyond an occasional hello. As far as that goes, why did he pick you to play the professor?"

Syd hesitated. "I may know the answer to that one. You see—"

"Wait a minute," Andrea interrupted. "Where are you?" A fog had abruptly come up out of nowhere. "I can't see you."

"I'm right here," his voice came from behind her. "Where are you?"

"How'd you get back there? Stop moving around!"

"I'm standing still! *You're* moving around!"

The fog was so thick Andrea couldn't see her own feet. It was an odd sort of fog, white and light-filled, not a nighttime kind of fog at all. Andrea had a distinct floating sensation, even though she was certain her feet hadn't left the ground.

"It's like pushing through cotton!" Syd's voice complained from some-

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where ahead of her.

"Now you're in front of me! And your voice is fainter!"

"Andrea, stay where you are — let me find you."

"You know what's happening, don't you?" she called out. "It's Otto — he's doing this. He's trying to separate us, Syd!"

"Keep talking! Don't stop — keep talking!"

Andrea talked. She babbled — anything that came in mind. She swung her arms around, standing in place, trying to reach Syd in the fog. Suddenly a hand grasped her elbow. "Should I yell or is that you?"

"It's me," Syd breathed in her ear. "Give me your other hand — we've got to hold on to each other." They gripped each other's hands and felt their way slowly in a crablike motion, unable to see where they were going.

"Heidi! Heidi!" cried a young voice through the fog.

"Who's that?" Syd asked, alarmed.

"My ersatz brother. Don't answer."

They stood motionless in the fog and listened to young Franzl Krause calling his sister Heidi. Eventually the boy's voice sounded farther and farther away, then stopped altogether.

"Do you think he's gone?" Syd whispered.

"Sounds like it." Hell of a fog that could make a little boy's voice so full of menace. The floaty feeling was gone; Andrea could feel the rough cobblestones under her high heels. "I can break an ankle here if I'm not careful ... look! A break in the fog — there are some houses!"

"Where? I can't see!"

"Wipe your glasses, Syd."

He took off his glasses and wiped them. "Aha, I know where we are. The professor's house is right down here." They left the fog behind them and hurried along a quiet little street. "Here we are."

It wasn't much warmer inside than out. The professor's house was musty and damp, jam-packed with mildewy books and papers. "Makes you appreciate central heating," Andrea said. "How about some coffee?"

"No coffee. It'll have to be cocoa."

They sat in the kitchen drinking the professor's cocoa. "Wonder where they are," Andrea said. "These people whose places we've taken — the professor and Heidi. What are the rules governing other people's fantasies?"

"God knows. I'm more concerned about how we get out."

"Syd — you were starting to tell me when the fog came up. About why Otto picked you to play his old schoolmaster?"

"Oh, yes. Well, he and I had a run-in at Lincoln Center. Every time he put out the chairs for rehearsal, I always got the same one. Rickety thing about to collapse. I kept telling him about it, but he didn't pay any attention. So about the fifth or sixth time, I refused to sit down and even held up rehearsal until he brought me a decent chair to sit on."

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"Yes — I remember that!"

"So he brought me a good one — and then muttered *Jew boy* under his breath."

Andrea whistled. "Then what?"

"I complained to his boss, and he got a severe dressing down. Otto was humiliated — in front of me."

"And now he's getting even."

"Yep. His father had taught him to hate Russians, but he'd picked up his anti-Semitism all by himself. By casting me as a part-Russian schoolmaster who had *also* given him a hard time, he's able to kill several birds with one stone."

"But how is he doing it, Syd? How can he force other people to act out roles in what can't be anything more than a daydream?"

"I don't know. I'll tell you one thing, though. Otto doesn't have complete control over what's happening. My function is to let him humiliate me in front of his peers. But a couple of times I've been able to top him. He always gets the last word, but I've managed to make him uncomfortable a time or two. He's not omnipotent."

Andrea was thinking. "You know, you're right. I was able to outstare him the second time he forced me to go down those steps. And Syd, I wouldn't be here right now if he had total control! I'd be back in the Krause household, listening to my loving family tell me how crazy I am."

Syd's eyes went wide behind the glasses. "Say, that's right! And the fog, and the boy who came looking for you? That little trick didn't work — we're *here*, aren't we?"

"Maybe together we're strong enough to resist him," Andrea said with a note of excitement in her voice. "He can force us to do what he wants singly, but together we might be more than he can handle. 'United we stand,' and all those clichés. Syd, does the professor have a spare bed? I've got to stay here tonight."

"He has two beds in the same room, if you don't mind that."

"Perfect. I don't think we should get too far away from each other." Then, apropos of nothing and only because it was bothering her, she blurted out: "I want my cello!"

Syd smiled, understanding. "I know. It's not easy, doing without music. Sometimes I want to play so badly I could cry."

They were both silent a moment. "Syd. Do you think we can get out of this?"

He shook his head I-don't-know. "Let's sleep on it," he said.

The morning was bright and sparkling, and considerably warmer than the day before; the effect was to make Andrea feel tentatively hopeful. "Do you wake up every morning?" she asked Syd.

"Not every morning," he said. "Sometimes I just sort of become aware of myself, going someplace or

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doing something. I have no memory of anything immediately before."

Andrea nodded. "That's the way it was for me yesterday. Have you tried to leave the village?"

"Innumerable times. I always end up back in the village square, with that dry fountain and its silly statue. No matter what road I follow, it always leads me right back to the square."

"Then that's the first thing to try. Let's see if Otto can stop the two of us together. I'd love to get out of here before we find out what that freak has in mind for Heidi Krause."

"Let's go, then. Ready?"

"Before we start — Syd, do you have any money? Austrian money?"

"There's some in the professor's desk. Why? What do you need?"

"Shoes. Look at these stilts I'm wearing! I'm not going to get very far in these. I should never have bought them. I wore them only once, before, uh—"

Syd pressed his lips together. "The one time you wore them — was it to a rehearsal?"

"Ah ... yes, it was."

"And Otto saw you in them and liked what he saw — and here you are."

Andrea stared at him. "I'm here because Otto What's His Name *liked my shoes?!*"

"Otto Schrag. He liked the way you looked in them, Andrea. And in that skirt."

"Not my skirt. I don't own anything this short."

"Well, the shoes just gave him the idea, then. Another good reason to get you another pair. There's no shoe shop here, just a general clothing store that carries footwear along with everything else." He glanced at Andrea. "Don't let it get to you."

"This is incredible," she said. "My life is interrupted, perhaps permanently changed — all because some man I barely know looks at my legs and decides he wants to see more? I'm jerked out of my own life and forced into this, this—"

"I know."

"Syd — go get the money. We've got to get out of here."

They left the professor's house and made their way to the square, where they had to wait a few minutes until the clothing store opened. The one clerk was a birdlike woman, with nothing of the Valkyrian presence of Heidi Krause's mother. The clerk greeted Syd as "professor" and cast a sly sideways glance at Andrea.

"Good morning," Syd answered without missing a beat. "Young Heidi here needs some new shoes, and Frau Krause has asked that I see she selects some, ah, sensible ones?"

The clerk gave him a knowing look and smirked in Andrea's direction. Crazy Heidi Krause.

Ten minutes later they were back out in the square. Andrea was wearing hideous but comfortable new shoes, the high heels left with the clerk for disposal. Syd pointed out the road to Vi-

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enna. The day was pleasant; it occurred to Andrea that they had skipped a season, and they'd done so overnight. Yesterday was late fall, the beginning of winter; today there was a smell of spring in the air.

"How are the shoes?" Syd asked.

"Fine. Warm and comfortable. All I have to do is get used to the way they look." They were walking east from the square, nearing the area where the village stopped and the countryside proper began. Andrea felt her mouth go dry with excitement.

"Aw hell, *no!*" Syd said unexpectedly.

"What's the matter?" Then she felt it, too: that *swimming* feeling was back, slowing her down, limiting her movement. She grabbed Syd's hand. "Hold on — don't let go!"

Together they pushed around a bend in the road alongside an old building with potted plants in the windowsills. Andrea distractedly thought she heard someone singing Verdi. They came out of the bend to find a group of six men doing road repair work.

"Oh, not them again!" Syd sighed, as he and Andrea came to a stop.

"Who are they?"

"An Italian work crew. They're brought in as cheap manual labor and then shipped back home when the job is finished. Prepare yourself to witness another exciting episode in the life of Otto Schrag."

"What's going to happen?" Andrea asked.

"A stupid fight is going to happen. Otto is going to prove himself a man among men. See that fellow? Keep your eye on him."

That fellow was the obvious leader of the work crew — a big, swaggering, happy-seeming sort. Good-looking, and he knew it; he was quick to notice Andrea watching him. Even though the sun wasn't yet halfway up the sky, he pretended to be hot as as excuse to take off his shirt. Smooth chest, swelling biceps.

"That was for your benefit," said Syd. "We'd better — Andrea!"

"Hold tight!" she cried at the very moment she felt her hand slip out of Syd's. She was being forced across the road, straight toward the Italian workman. "Syd!"

"I can't move! I'm stuck!" he bawled in frustration.

Andrea found herself standing so close to the workman they were almost touching. The smell of sweat and sex radiated from his body — a body of which Andrea was self-consciously aware. He started talking to her in Italian, softly, suggestively. Like most musicians, Andrea had picked up a little Italian, but it wasn't enough to understand what he was saying. Not that it mattered; he made his meaning clear. He talked with his eyes as well as his mouth, and he started stroking her upper arm with the back of his hand. "*Bella, bellissima,*" he crooned.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," Andrea answered in German.

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"Ascoltatemi — capite quel de che dico?"

Andrea tried walking away but couldn't move. The other workmen were watching with interest. Across the road Syd was yelling her name, but nobody seemed to hear him except Andrea. She was wondering what to do when a burst of noisy laughter interrupted the scene.

The laughter was coming from the old building with the potted plants in the windowsills. The door flew open and out came Otto Schrag, wearing DiDi Moran on his arm and surrounded by his retinue of burghers. At the sound of Otto's voice, the Italian's hand instinctively tightened on Andrea's arm.

"Lass' mich," she said sharply. She *hated* being grabbed by the arm.

He grabbed her other arm and started to pull her off the road. *Like a sack of potatoes,* Andrea thought. She protested, loudly.

Otto Schrag was watching. "You!" he called out in German. "Let her go!"

The workman answered something in Italian that sounded faintly obscene.

Otto strode across the road. "I said let her go!"

"How about *you* letting go?" Andrea said to him.

He ignored her. "You. Laborer. Turn that woman loose this instant."

In answer, the Italian thrust Andrea behind him in a strong-man-protecting-his-woman gesture. *"Wunderbar,"* Andrea muttered.

Otto's eyes narrowed into what he seemed to think was a menacing look. "Am I going to have to knock some sense into that thick Italian skull of yours?"

"Misericordia! Povero me!" The Italian pretended to be afraid, drawing a laugh from the other road workers.

"All right, clown," Otto said with a world-weariness that looked as if it had been practiced in front of a mirror. "You were warned." He didn't even bother taking off his jacket but suddenly launched a fist toward the workman's face.

It was a sucker punch; the Italian staggered back a step, and then instantly went into a boxer's crouch. One fist shot out and clipped Otto's ear.

"Oh, bravo," Andrea said sarcastically. Meaning both of them.

The two men were obviously enjoying themselves, testing their strength in public. DiDi Moran gave an occasional squeal and once or twice cried out, "Be careful, Otto!" Andrea said nothing, figuring one cheerleader was enough. How trite! The men contending, the women standing on the sidelines watching. Otto Schrag had no imagination at all. It wasn't the first time a woman had been used to give men an excuse to fight, and it wouldn't be the last. The local king of the hill driving off some outside virility figure threatening his little domain. Wow.

The brawl began to look like a stage fight performed by amateur ac-

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tors: unimpressive Otto taking a wild swing at his opponent — and the big, muscular Italian staggering around as if mortally wounded. Then he would regain his balance but fail to take advantage of Otto's wide-open stance, just waiting for Otto to swing again. It looked phonier than Saturday Night Wrestling, and it went on and on and on. Otto obviously liked this part.

But at last he was satisfied. The Italian sat slumped on the ground, blood streaming from his nose and a cut over his left eyebrow. DiDi Moran was cooing and fussing over Otto, and the village men were congratulating him. Andrea had hoped to slip away unnoticed, but Otto Schrag took her hand (much to DiDi Moran's annoyance) and murmured, "You're safe now, my dear. You don't need to thank me."

"All right, I won't."

Otto shot her a dirty look. But then he smiled quickly and said, "You look a little shaky — why don't you come with us? Some coffee and brandy should settle you down." He gestured with his hand, the fingertips lightly brushing one of her breasts.

Andrea slapped his hand away. "Keep your hands to yourself. And I'm not coming with you."

Otto smiled, unperturbed. "We'll see."

Something between a snarl and a hiss split the air — and Andrea found herself under attack. A hitting, kicking, slapping DiDi Moran hurled herself at Andrea, her face wild with jealousy. Otto's ultimate fantasy? Two women fighting over him like a couple of cats?

I refuse, Andrea thought. *I simply refuse.*

She held up her arms to fend off DiDi's blows the best she could and didn't hit back. She told the other woman to stop, several times, in both German and English — but DiDi was beyond hearing. Finally a laughing Otto slipped one arm around the television star's waist and carried her away. The men from the village followed, also laughing. Good show this morning.

Andrea heaved a sigh of relief and saw Syd Grossinger trotting toward her, at last unstuck from his position at the side of the road. "Did she hurt you?" he asked. "I couldn't move until now."

"I'm all right."

"Look at your shoes, Andrea."

She glanced down at her feet; she was wearing her high heels again.

What...? Her spurt of fear at this unnatural change immediately gave way to anger. "Oh, for crying out loud! Well, I guess we can forget about the two of us together overriding Otto's 'commands' or whatever they are. Damn. Syd, you've seen this fight before? Is it always the same?"

"Not exactly. All the other times they fought over DiDi."

"But Otto always fights the same man? That guy over there?"

"Always the same one." Syd sud-

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denly caught her meaning. "You think maybe *he*...?"

"One way to find out." They hurried over to the Italian laborer, who was still seated on the ground, dabbing at the cut over his eye with a bandanna. "That's a nasty cut you've got there," Andrea said in English.

"It don't hurt none," a Lower East Side accent told them. "Otto can't hit worth a turkeyfuck." His head jerked up. "You spoke English!"

"All my true-blue American life," Andrea said cheerily. "Look, we're prisoners here—"

She didn't get to finish her sentence because the Italian let out a whoop that would have started an avalanche if the neighboring mountain had been a little closer. Andrea and Syd both found themselves swept up in a muscular embrace and swung round and around as their newfound ally laughed like a maniac.

"Shh!" Syd said in alarm. "Otto's not out of earshot!"

"That's O.K., that's O.K.!" Andrea cried, thinking fast. "Smile and wave at him! Come on, *do* it!"

The Italian put them back on their feet, and the three of them stood there smiling and waving. A little way down the road Otto stopped and watched them. He hesitated, then turned and walked off toward the village. His entourage followed.

"Well," Syd said, bemused. "That's the first time I've seen Otto unsure of himself."

"Christ, Professor, I didn't know you'd been kidnapped, too," the Italian said. "I thought you belonged here."

"I made the same mistake about you — that's what Otto wanted us to think. By the way, I'm Syd Grossinger; she's Andrea Caldwell."

"D'Amico, Joey D'Amico. Jesus, you don't know how glad I am to see you!"

"You've stopped bleeding," Andrea said, surprised.

"Yeah, I heal fast," Joey D'Amico said. "Ten minutes, fifteen. So's I'll be in good shape the next time he wants to show off."

One of the Italian workmen called out something; Joey waved him off.

"What was that about?" Syd asked.

"Nothin'. They're just knockin' off for the day."

"Already? It's only midmorning."

"No, it isn't," Andrea said. "The sun's over there now, in the west. It's late afternoon."

"Time's all screwed up here," Joey said. "He wants it to be night, it's night. Nothin' you can do about it."

"Maybe now there is," Syd said. "Otto clearly wasn't counting on the three of us getting together. We need to talk — let's go back to the professor's house."

"Syd," Andrea said, "remember what we came here for? We were going to try that road to Vienna."

"Won't do no good," Joey said. "It'll just take you back to the square."

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Syd threw the other man a wry look. "You've tried, too, have you?"

"Well, I haven't," Andrea said stubbornly. "As long as we're here I want to try."

"In those shoes?"

"Barefoot, if need be. On my hands and knees."

"It don't matter none," Joey shrugged. "We follow this road either direction, we still end up back in the square. Might as well head toward Vienna."

They had to walk all of eight minutes before they arrived back in the village square. "Convinced?" Syd asked.

Andrea sighed. "Convinced."

Sure, I knew Otto in New York," Joey said around mouthfuls of potato pancake. They were in the professor's kitchen, eating a hasty meal prepared from their host's well-stocked larder. Andrea wondered if anyone ever starved to death in a fantasy.

"And?" Syd prompted.

Joey swallowed. "Him and me had it out once back home." He laughed. "You can bet your sweet ass it ended different that time. Old Otto learned a thing or two, let me tell you. He never called me a wop bastard again after that."

Andrea and Syd exchanged a quick look. "That's getting to be quite a list," Andrea said. "Russians and Jews and now Italians? And Otto brought Joey here to get even with him?"

"Could be," Syd nodded.

"He looked down his nose at me," Joey said in a tone of wonder. "At *me*, Joey D'Amico! Just because I'm Italian. And him no better'n a janitor. A college degree and he couldn't do no better'n janitor!"

"What's this?" Syd said. "Otto has a college degree?"

Joey made a noise of disgust. "From Columbia, he said. In German."

"Wait a minute." Andrea was puzzled. "Otto's native tongue is German — but he went to an American university to get a degree in German?"

"That's what he said," Joey shrugged. "He coulda been lyin'."

"Not necessarily," Syd commented. "A lot of Europeans go to American schools and use their language to get a degree. It's easier than staying home and mastering a discipline like history or science."

Andrea was astonished. "American universities permit this?"

"All the time. Tuition money is tuition money. You know, it fits — Otto Schrag was no scholar. It's the sort of thing he'd so. Is it really surprising he ended up as big a loser in New York as he was here? Joey, what was the fight about?"

The other man grinned. "I stole his girl."

A rapid knock sounded at the front door.

All three of them jumped. "Has anyone come visiting before?" Andrea asked Syd.

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"No." He looked worried. "Could it be Otto?"

Joey stood up. "Let's find out." He went to answer the door and returned almost immediately. "Just some kid lookin' for his sister. I sent 'im away." The knock repeated, louder this time. Joey grunted. "I *thought* I sent 'im away."

"He's looking for me," Andrea frowned. "I'd better talk to him."

They all three went to the door, where an angry Franzl Krause was waiting. "Heidi, Mother says if you don't come home there's going to be trouble! If Father finds out you were here alone in this house with *two men*, he's going to kill you!"

"Why, you dirty-minded little kid," Joey said amiably. "Bet you can't wait to tell the old man."

Franzl ignored Joey and spoke to Syd. "Professor, Mother says she's going to call the constable if Heidi doesn't come back with me. She says she knows what you're up to. Buying Heidi shoes, keeping her out of school all day—"

Andrea interrupted. "Franzl, if she's so concerned about me, why isn't she here herself? Why did she send you?"

"She's cooking supper," the boy muttered.

"And nothing must interfere with eating in the Krause household. Franzl, don't you get tired of doing their dirty work for them? *You're* always the one who has to come and find me. It seems to me you and I ought to be on the same side."

"*I'm* not the crazy one!" the boy exploded. "I don't go messing around with dirty old men!"

"Hey," said Joey.

"I hate you! Everybody laughs at me because I've got a crazy sister! I hope they cut you up in little pieces and feed you to the dogs!"

"Franzl, I was trying to make friends," Andrea said in exasperation, "but you're such a nasty little bugger I see it's a waste of time. You go tell those ogres you call parents that I don't belong in that household and I'm not coming back. You understand? I'm not coming back *at all*. Now scram."

Franzl made an obscene gesture and fled.

"Whew," said Joey, shutting the door. "You're supposed to be that little monster's sister?"

"That's my role," Andrea said with distaste.

"Do you think his mother'll really call the constable?" Syd worried.

Andrea didn't answer; she'd just thought of something. "Joey — you understood what Franzl was saying, didn't you? And yet earlier today you didn't understand *me* when I spoke German to you."

A look of bewilderment appeared on Joey's face. "That was German? Yeah, I *did* understand him, didn't I?"

"Well, well," Syd smiled. "Isn't that interesting. Otto's controls are breaking down?"

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"Oh, wouldn't *that* be nice!" Andrea smiled back. "Joey — finish telling us about taking Otto's girl away from him. Tell us everything you can."

It turned out there wasn't all that much to tell. The woman in question was a theater cashier named Diana who had been the object of Otto Schrag's unwelcome attention for months. According to Joey, Diana hadn't really been Otto's girl after all; she'd considered him a creep and consistently refused to go out with him. So Otto spent a lot of time mooning over Diana, and Diana spent a lot of time avoiding Otto.

Enter Joey D'Amico — big, handsome, full of life. Joey had developed his muscles handling oversized cargo on river barges. At the time he was lifted out of his own life and forced into the role of a laborer in Austria, he had been working for a coastal barge line that transported chemicals and petroleum; Joey himself worked on an oil tanker. Joey was proud of his job; he considered it real man's work. Otto's custodial duties at Lincoln Center, on the other hand, he viewed as an old woman's job. In his own way, Joey D'Amico looked down on Otto Schrag just as much as Otto looked down on him. The conflict between the two men was one of ascendancy, of asserting symbolic and actual power over the other. The woman Diana was thus conventionally reduced to a prize to be awarded to the winner. And Joey had won.

"You see what that damn kraut's got me doin' here?" Joey said with disgust. "Workin' a pick and shovel! Shee-ut. I'd like to see Otto Schrag on a tanker! He wouldn't last ten minutes."

But in the world Otto had created, *he* was the winner and Joey D'Amico was forced to play the goat. Joey said, "But it wasn't the same today. *You* were there," pointing at Andrea. "That's the first time that's ever happened. And he forgot to call me names today. Usually he calls me *dago dirt* or somethin' like that. He forgot that today."

"Otto may be trying to juggle too many things at once," Syd said.

"Fuckin' krauts," Joey said. "Think they're better'n everybody."

"It's not just them," Andrea sighed. "It's anyone who's ever puffed himself up at somebody else's expense. The Germans once institutionalized race hatred, so we've come to think of it as their special province. It's not."

"Ah, I dunno."

"Otto's a zero, Joey, that's his problem — not his nationality. If he were Italian like you, he'd still find some reason to look down on you. Like maybe his ancestors came from a 'better' part of Italy than yours did. Any excuse would do."

"Yeah, well, maybe."

" 'In the nightmare of the dark'," Andrea murmured, " 'all the dogs of Europe bark.' "

" 's a nightmare, all right," Joey agreed.

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"What?" Syd said.

"Poem by Auden," Andrea explained. "The next part is: 'And the living nations wait / each sequestered in its hate.' *Sequestered* — good word. Otto's racial hatreds wall him off from what threatens him. They keep him warm and safe."

Joey was fidgeting. "What are we gonna do? We can't just go on sittin' here."

Andrea said, "I think the first thing we ought to do is try to get DiDi Moran away from Otto."

Syd agreed. "She can't be here by choice any more than the rest of us. Somehow there's strength in numbers here. Otto made a mistake when he brought you here, Andrea. Up to now, his three, ah, imports were all strangers to one another — Joey, DiDi Moran, and me. But you and I knew each other. Otto overlooked that."

"So how do we do it?" asked Joey, the man of action.

"They'll probably be at the *Gasthof* again tonight," Syd said. "We could try there. Why don't we go right now — before we lose our nerve?"

"Whaddaya mean, lose our nerve?" Joey snorted.

"Easy, Joey," Syd said. "I meant before *I* lose *my* nerve. O.K.?"

"O.K.," said Joey, mollified.

The lovely spring day had disappeared; in its place Otto had sent them a snowstorm, windy and subfreezing. Andrea, Syd, and Joey ransacked the professor's house, scrounging for warm clothing. Andrea ended up wrapping towels around her feet before pulling on a pair of the professor's oversized boots. "I've never before had so much trouble with *feet*," she grumbled.

Their strategy was to enter the *Gasthof*, go down the stairs to the center table, and take DiDi Moran away with them. A simple plan. ("Perhaps too simple?" Syd worried.) They had to fight their way through the blowing snow, using Joey as an anchor; at times they plowed through shoulder-high drifts. When at last they pushed open the door to the *Gasthof*, the blast of heat that hit them was a shock to their systems.

All noise stopped instantly. No talking, no clinking of glasses or scraping of benches. The three outsiders stood at the top of the stairway and looked down at the roomful of upturned, hostile faces. Otto Schrag and DiDi Moran were at the center table, surrounded by a buffer of village men.

Andrea was never more aware of the clannishness of the place than at that moment. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," she said nervously.

"Don't chicken out now," Joey growled.

"I won't." Andrea was holding one of Joey's hands, one of Syd's. "Let's go." She started down the stairs and Syd started with her — but Joey held back. "Joey?"

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"I, I can't move! I'm *fastened* here!"

"Joey's the one Otto's afraid of most," Syd said quickly. "He'll have to concentrate on holding him — maybe we can get through! Come on, Andrea."

They pushed their way down the stairs, swimming against the wall of resistance that rose up to stop them. Syd moved more and more slowly; Andrea was gradually leaving him behind.

"Heidi! Heidi!" a boy's voice suddenly called out.

"Don't listen!" Syd cried. "Don't pay any attention!"

Andrea concentrated all her effort on getting down the stairway. When she reached the bottom, she looked back up: Joey still at the top, Syd stuck halfway down. "Go on!" they both yelled.

She turned toward the center table. A wall of humanity three deep separated her from her goal: DiDi Moran was staring at her, obviously frightened. Andrea pushed at the human barrier — which parted slightly, just enough to let her slip through. She could see sweat glistening on Otto's face.

"Heidi," Franzl's voice called plaintively. "If you don't come with me, they're going to beat me! They'll *beat* me, Heidi!"

Andrea used her arms and elbows to push through to the table. Otto stood up and gave her his full attention: Andrea could neither speak nor move.

"I'm comin'!" Joey bellowed, and thundered down the stairs.

Otto quickly switched his attention back to the two men — and was forced to release Andrea. She reached across the table toward the television star. "Come on, DiDi! We don't have much time!"

DiDi gave a small scream and flapped both hands at Andrea. "Get away from me, you crazy Heidi person!"

"My name's not Heidi," Andrea said quickly, "and I'm not crazy. You want to get away from Otto, don't you? Here's your chance. Come on!"

"He said you were jealous and wanted to kill me!"

"That's a lie, DiDi, just like everything else here is a lie." She could smell the anxiety coming off Otto, trying to listen to her and hold the two men by the stairs at the same time. "I was kidnapped same as you, DiDi. Same as, er, the professor and the Italian workman. Do you understand? We're all in this together. Are you coming or not?"

DiDi made up her mind. "I'm coming." She took Andrea's outstretched hand and stood up. The two women pushed their way back to the stairs.

"Heidi — they're going to beat me! Don't you care?"

"Who *is* that?" DiDi asked.

"Explanations later," Syd said. "Let's get out of here first. Can we all move?"

They could. No air resistance, no swimming feeling — as if Otto had given up for the time being. They ran up the stairs and out through the door and into....

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...a rainstorm. The shoulder-high snowdrifts of ten minutes ago had disappeared. Needle-sharp rain slanted down from the black sky; visibility was practically nil. Andrea tripped over something and went sprawling. She looked back to see what she'd fallen over.

It was young Franzl Krause, lying unconscious in the middle of the road.

"Oh my God, *look* at that kid!" DiDi cried. Franzl's nose was smashed, both eyes swollen shut. One leg was bent under his body in an unnatural position.

Joey instinctively reached out toward the boy, but Andrea stopped him. "Leave him, Joey. It's a trick."

"A trick! The kid needs a doctor!"

Syd said, "Joey, don't you see? Otto put the boy here as a diversion — he *wants* us to stop and help him. We'd better run like hell."

"Oh, wow, yeah," Joey said in awed tones. "I dint think of that. Hey, let's move."

"You can't just leave him here!" DiDi protested.

"Yes, we can," Andrea said firmly, thinking it was just like Otto to use a threat to a child as a way of getting at them. Underhanded all the way down the line.

They followed Syd through the rain to the professor's house, which was mustier than ever. "What's that smell?" DiDi complained.

"Mildew," Syd answered her. "I don't think this house has been aired out once in the past fifty years."

"I'll get us some towels," Joey said.

DiDi lowered her voice, spoke to Andrea. "He doesn't *think* this house has been aired in fifty years? Doesn't he know? This is the professor's house, isn't it?"

"Yes, but Syd isn't the professor," Andrea explained. "He's a musician from New York."

"Oh, really?" DiDi beamed over at Syd. "Where's your guitar?"

Joey came back with an armload of towels. Syd pulled cushions off the tatty sofa so they could sit on the floor close to the one heater in the room. They dried themselves the best they could, and the other three filled DiDi in on what they'd figured out so far. "Oh, I get it," she said. "Like Syd's here to make Otto look smart, and Joey's here to make him look physical. O.K. — I can relate to that."

"And we all know what *you're* here for," Joey said, giving her an exaggerated leer. DiDi giggled, Andrea rolled her eyes, Syd pretended not to hear.

"You seem to be taking everything very calmly," Andrea said to DiDi. "Aren't you surprised by any of this?"

The glamour girl smiled her famous smile. "At this point in time I feel very balanced with myself," she said.

"Ah — meaning you weren't earlier?"

"Not when I first got here. I thought I was having a, you know, relapse? I'd just gotten the identity thing

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all settled. I liked myself, I was feeling good. Until I was strong enough to create my own identity, I didn't know who I was. It's awfully hard to get an identity my sort of way, like before everybody?"

Syd leaned toward Andrea. "Do you know what she's saying?"

"I think she means as a public figure."

"Yeah, that's what I said. Then when I get it all straightened out who I am, all of a sudden I don't know *where* I am. I mean, I go to bed in California and wake up in this horrible place where everybody goes around coughing and barking at each other, and they all understand what it means except me, and the only one who speaks English is that horrible Otto. Ugh."

"Sounds rough," Joey said sympathetically.

DiDi sparkled at him. "But it's O.K. again, now that I know I'm not alone. You'll think of something." That quickly, she had shifted responsibility for her welfare onto the others.

"Our DiDi is used to having people take care of her," Syd murmured to Andrea.

"One thing I still ain't clear on," Joey said. "I can see why DiDi's here, and me and Syd, too. But what are you doing here?" He pointed to Andrea.

"I think I'm mostly backup to DiDi," Andrea said. "In case Otto gets tired of being worshipped by only one woman. But I still don't know why I'm cast as Heidi Krause, or even who she is."

"Oh, I know who she is," DiDi said offhandedly. "She's some girl who went crazy because Otto rejected her. He says she always was a little bit weird."

"I'd say it was more likely Heidi rejected him," Syd remarked dryly. "Everything else that's going on here is in the nature of getting even. Otto Schrag likes humiliating people. Joey, me — and he obviously didn't have any luck with American women, since he brought in *two* of you to play games with. DiDi because of who she is — every man in the civilized world knows that face. Andrea as a way of hitting back at a girl he once knew who had humiliated *him*. It makes sense."

"Except for one little thing," Joey said. "How the fuck did he do it?"

"Ah yes," Syd smiled, "the great philosophical question we've all been avoiding: *How the fuck did he do it?*" He sighed. "All I know is that this is his fantasy, but reality has an odd way of intruding. Otto doesn't have complete control. We can defy him, within limits."

"So maybe it isn't a fantasy after all," Andrea said. "In a fantasy, the person doing the fantasizing can make anything happen he wants, can't he. Look. You know that *swimming* feeling you get here? Especially when you're in a hurry? Trying to run but barely able to move. Isn't that familiar? You've all felt it before."

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"Sure," said Joey. "In nightmares. When you're tryin' to run away and can't get nowhere." He looked suddenly abashed, realizing he'd just given it away that strong-man Joey D'Amico suffered from nightmares.

"Exactly," said Andrea. "Dreams. You know how dreams always change scenes so abruptly? You're one place doing one thing, and then without any warning you're someplace else, doing something different. Like quick scene changes in a movie."

"That's sure the way it is here," Joey agreed.

Syd was nodding. "The sleeping mind doesn't observe normal logic. Logically, the people in this village should look at Andrea and me and *not* see Heidi Krause and the professor. Our appearances haven't changed. But it doesn't work that way. We haven't displaced those two people, we have *become* them — as far as the needs of Otto's wish fulfillment are concerned. I think you're right, Andrea. It is more like a sleeping dream than a conscious fantasy."

"Hold it, hold it," Joey objected. "You sayin' we're just dreamin' all this?"

"Not us," Andrea said. "Otto Schrag. You and DiDi and Syd and I — we're all just characters in somebody else's dream."

There was a long silence as they all thought about it. Then: "No," DiDi Moran said in the most reasonable voice imaginable. "*I am real.* I decided that three weeks ago in California."

"I don't believe it," Joey was saying. "Andrea — that's a nutty idea!"

"Then what's your explanation?"

"I don't know! But I ain't no character in that shithead's dreams! Jeez."

"Hold on, Joey," Syd said. "It does explain why Otto lacks complete control. His unconscious mind just won't allow him to believe certain things. Like all the verbal sparring he does with me in my role of his old professor. Otto wins the arguments, but they're not always clean wins — I get in some good shots. Otto's unconscious won't let him think he could ever defeat the professor *completely*. The old man intimidated him too much."

"Right," Andrea said. "Look at what he had DiDi and me doing. So far all Otto has used me for is to make DiDi jealous—"

"And I *was* jealous," DiDi interrupted. "I positively loathe that smarmy little man — but when I saw you, Andrea, well, you know, I just kind of went crazy."

"That's Otto's doing," Andrea said. "Like his not allowing you to understand German — he didn't want you talking to anybody but him. Otto doesn't like competition. But with this Heidi Krause I'm supposed to be, he doesn't have that kind of control. She probably did say no to him, because earlier today I was able to turn down his invitation to join his little entourage. Right after the fight with Joey. But with DiDi — DiDi, don't

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take this the wrong way, but to Otto you're a fictional character. You're remote and glamorous and not quite real. At least, you're not real in the real world of Otto Schrag."

"I can relate to that," DiDi smiled. "I think."

"You're the only one of us he didn't know personally. Syd gets in a few licks, I can say no, Joey keeps bouncing back. But you, the fictional character — Otto has no prior experience with you to limit his dreams. He can make you do anything he likes."

DiDi laughed humorlessly. "Well, not *anything* he likes. Give me some credit."

"What do you mean?"

"You all think I've been sleeping with that man, don't you? Well, I haven't. Not even once."

"I always knew Otto was crazy," Joey nodded.

"He keeps trying," DiDi said. "I mean, like three or four times a day he tries. But every time we get close to the bed, I'm able to walk away. Like, all I have to do is turn around and *walk away*. It's the only time I ever get to do what *I* want."

Syd was laughing softly. "Poor Otto — I can almost feel sorry for him. All his life he's been a nonentity. *Losing* is so deeply ingrained that even in a wish-fulfillment dream his unconscious mind won't allow him to believe that the beautiful DiDi Moran would ever, under any circumstances, go to bed with him. Ha."

"It's a good thing for us Otto has such a low self-image," Andrea said.

"I'm supposed to be making a TV movie," DiDi was telling Joey. "They all probably think I just ran away or something, It's so easy to get a reputation for being, you know, temperamental."

"Zat so?" Joey said, moving in closer.

"Well, you know, you're in a situation where eveybody's watching you and everything's going wrong, and they all think it's your fault. Most of the stuff I get thrown at me, I didn't create."

"That don't sound fair." Joey's hand was resting on DiDi's knee.

"Those two certainly took to each other in a hurry," Syd murmured to Andrea.

Andrea wondered if they really did like each other, or whether they were acting out of habit. Two sexual people probably felt obligated to make some sort of move on each other. Andrea rubbed her eyes; she was tired and getting fuzzy-headed. "Let's pack it in for tonight. I can't think anymore."

The four of them went into the professor's bedroom and stood looking at the two beds. "Uh, Syd," Joey said, "you and Andrea are good friends, aren't you?"

"Not that good," Andrea answered for Syd. "Come on, DiDi — you and I'll take this one." She climbed into the nearer bed.

DiDi got in on the other side. They

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watched Syd and Joey take the mattress off the other bed and then toss a coin to see who got the mattress on the floor and who got the springs. Syd got the mattress.

"Isn't that silly?" Andrea whispered to DiDi. "Both of them prefer to be uncomfortable rather than share — so worried about two men in the same bed, how it would look. Aren't you glad you're a woman and don't have to worry about things like that?"

"Yeah," DiDi said in a small voice. "You are going to stay on your side of the bed, aren't you?"

"Oh, go to sleep," Andrea snarled.

They all woke up in the morning in the same place. Otto was leaving them alone.

"Because he wants to or because he has to?" Syd asked over breakfast.

Andrea said, "There's something I want to take care of. I want to find out if Franzl Krause is all right."

"That beat-up kid we found last night?" DiDi said in surprise. "You're the one who said leave him."

"I know," Andrea admitted. "And even though this is all Otto Schrag's dream, it's as real a life as we can have right now. Which means it's just as real for that boy. I have to know what happened to him."

They finished eating and planned their strategy. Andrea couldn't go to the Krause house herself for obvious reasons. Syd was a little uneasy about going, because of Franzl's hint that Frau Krause suspected a little hanky-panky between Heidi and the professor. So Syd and Andrea stayed out of sight while DiDi and Joey went up to the Krause house to ask.

It took them less than two minutes. "We talked to the mother," DiDi said. "She told us we were misinformed. She said they didn't have a son. She never heard of Franzl Krause — well, that's what she *said*."

"She said they had a daughter," Joey added, "but she'd up and run away to Vienna."

"Aha!" Syd was grinning broadly. "Otto has written the Krause family off — they didn't work out as a way to keep you under control, Andrea. So, exit one Franzl Krause."

"Thank goodness," Andrea said. "He was beginning to get to me. I wonder if there ever was a Franzl Krause or whether Otto invented him out of whole cloth." She was heartened by the thought that the real Heidi had gotten away from this place and these people. "DiDi, did you understand everything Frau Krause said to you? She speaks only German, you know."

DiDi's mouth dropped open. "*That's* what felt so funny — it was German!"

"So Otto's just letting us run loose, no controls at all?" Syd looked uneasy. "Marshaling his forces, getting ready for something big?"

They were back in the village square, where it seemed natural to end

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up. They all sat on the rim of the dry fountain, needing to think. Andrea stretched out her legs and looked at her feet: she was wearing the professor's boots. Miniskirts and army boots: maybe she'd set a new style.

That morning she'd put the boots on again more or less without thinking; but now that she was trying to remember, she couldn't recall seeing her high-heeled shoes lying around anywhere. Also, there'd been no swimming against air resistance today, no drifty feeling, no being frozen in place. None of them had been compelled to do anything against their wills. There'd been no abrupt changes of season or location. Time was progressing normally, behaving itself.

"Otto really is keeping his hands off, isn't he?" she said aloud. "That nightmarish quality of the past few days just isn't here now."

"Don't mean nothin'," Joey said. " 's always like this when Otto ain't around."

"He's right," Syd said. "At least I've always had these, ah, offstage periods before."

"Why?" Andrea asked. "Could these be periods when Otto is awake?" The other three stared at her. "I mean awake and living in the real world, in New York. His dream world would continue on an unconscious level even during his waking hours, wouldn't it? But we're free of his *active* control because his waking attention is elsewhere. It could work that way, couldn't it?"

Joey shrugged. "So? How does that get us outta here?"

"Oh, I was just thinking that if he's awake in the other world, then maybe he's asleep in this one."

Joey jumped to his feet. "That's it! What we gotta do is find out where he's sleepin' — he's gotta be sleepin' somewheres — and when we find 'im we...."

"We what?"

"We kill 'im."

Syd snorted. "By driving a stake through his heart? Come on, Joey, what good would killing Otto do? You think we'd all be magically transported back to New York where we came from?"

"Not me," said DiDi. "I came from California."

"Can't hurt to try," Joey said belligerently.

"You can guarantee that, can you?" Syd persisted. "What happens to the dream when the dreamer dies? You could be killing *us*."

"Shit." Joey kicked out with one foot, an angry-little-boy gesture. "Man, what I wouldn't give to have that Otto on a tanker for just one run! Huh! He wouldn't do *nothin'* right on a tanker. Otto's an old woman."

DiDi looked puzzled. "Why are you talking about tankers?"

Joey explained he crewed aboard an oil tanker for a coastal barge line. "You gotta be sure of your footing on them babies. I'd like to see how Otto handles himself in a fight when he's

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tryin' to keep his balance in rough water." Joey's eyes glistened as he imagined his revenge. "Yeah, man. I'd sure like to see that."

"You'd undoubtedly make mincemeat of him," Andrea said in disgust. "There. Does it make you feel better?"

"No, it don't make me feel better," Joey mimicked her tone. "What's with you?"

"You're just like Otto, Joey," Andrea complained. "All you can think of is how to make the other guy look small."

Joey gave a dirty-old-man laugh. "That's not *all* I think of, sweetheart."

"That's part of it, too," she objected. "If you and Otto weren't in this silly contest to outmacho each other—"

"Hey — it's all my fault? That what you're sayin'?"

Syd cleared his throat. "Well, now, Joey, you have to admit it's at least partially your responsibility." Unknowingly he'd assumed a professional air. "It's Otto's quarrel with you that—"

"Well, well, he can talk!" Joey sneered. "Aren't you afraid somebody'll notice you — *Professor?* How'd you like to get beat up every day?"

"Stop it! Stop it — all of you!" DiDi Moran was near tears. "Why do you keep on like that? We've got to relate to each other, you know, like reach out to each other. It's bad enough just being here, I don't want to listen to you going on at each other like that!"

"Well, excuse us all to pieces, Your Majesty!" Syd said. "I forgot you were outside all these little troubles that beset us ordinary folk. You sit there on your billion-dollar behind and wait for us to figure out a way to get you out of here — have you even once thought about trying to help *us?*"

The expression on her face said she had not. Joey turned abruptly and started jogging angrily around the fountain, trying to drain off his hostile energy.

"I just wanted us to have a good relationship," DiDi said forlornly. "What's so awful about that?"

"Nothing, DiDi," Syd sighed. "I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"I mean, I finally got an identity, and what good's it doing me? You can't be yourself when you're just a fantasy figure in some jerk-off's dream. That's what you get an identity *for*, so you can be more than that."

Get an identity. Like picking one up at Bloomingdale's, Andrea thought; latest thing in identities, third floor. DiDi was looking scared and miserable, and all of a sudden Andrea felt sorry for her. DiDi had done everything with her life that was expected of her; she'd suppressed the development of all aspects of herself except those that made her sexually attractive. According to the only rules DiDi Moran knew, she should be rewarded and pampered and *safe.* Instead, she was

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caught up in a world where reality was so fragile it could be dreamed away by a stranger.

Andrea put her arm around the other woman's shoulders and gave her a little hug. "DiDi — you mentioned Otto kept trying to get you into bed. What bed? That is, where is it? Where does Otto stay?"

"In the same house he lived in when he was a boy. His parents' house."

"Are his parents still living there?"

"No. Just Otto and me. Why?"

"I'm not sure, but it seems to me that if we're going to do something, it'll have to be during one of those quiescent periods. Let's go see if Otto's there, see if he's asleep. People do dream they're sleeping — I've done it myself." Andrea turned to Syd. "What do you think?"

"We might as well," he shrugged. "Nobody else has come up with anything."

Andrea stepped out into Joey's path as he made his next circuit of the fountain. She stuck out her hand. "Sorry, Joey. Friends?"

He didn't even hesitate, but scooped up her hand and held it to his lips. "*Come comanda.*"

DiDi led them to a one-story house only three streets away. "Back here," she said, walking in with the familiarity of the frequent sojourner.

They found Otto. He was sleeping — fully dressed, as if he'd just stretched out for a quick nap. The room was stuffy; the one window was tightly closed. Otto slept flat on his back, but he did not snore. The women stood on one side of his bed, the men on the other, looking down on the man who had stolen their lives.

"I still say we oughta kill 'im," Joey muttered.

"He dreamed us here," Syd said softly. "How do we get him to dream us back? Is there a way to dream ourselves back?"

"I didn't dream at all last night," DiDi whispered.

"Yes, you did, you just don't remember," Andrea said — and stopped herself. Those were the rules of the real world, real-life logic. Perhaps DiDi didn't dream here. She herself didn't remember dreaming. "Maybe that's it," she said. "Do either of you two remember dreaming last night?"

Neither Syd nor Joey did. Otto slept on.

"Look at his eyelids," Andrea said.

Otto's eyelids were twitching, indicating the rapid eye movement of stage-four delta sleep. "He's dreaming?" Syd asked. "But *this* is his dream."

"Dreams inside of dreams," Joey said. "So what?"

"So maybe the only way out of Otto's dream world is to beat him at his own game," Andrea said in exasperation. "If we could dream about *him*—"

"Shh," cautioned Syd.

"Oh, why not wake him up?" Andrea went on recklessly. "Force him out of wherever he is now and back

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here — control things ourselves once, just for a change! Should be a nice traumatic experience for him. I think Otto Schrag deserves a little shock, don't you?"

"If it's bad for Otto, I'm all for it," Joey said grimly, grabbing Otto's shirtfront. "Come on, you fuckin' kraut," he yelled, "wake up!"

Andrea felt herself reaching for the man on the bed. Suddenly all four of them were grabbing at him, shaking him, screaming.

Otto opened his eyes. ...

...and Andrea jumped back to the curb just in time to miss being clipped by a yellow taxicab. "Look where yer goin', y' stupid broad!" the Puerto Rican driver yelled at her.

She was home.

Dizzy, she wrapped both arms around a utility pole and held on for dear life. When she felt more stable, she lifted her head and tried to get her bearings. Columbus Avenue, not far from her apartment. She looked around — no DiDi, no Syd, no Joey. Was she the only one to make it back? The men could be in their own neighborhoods. And DiDi ... in California?

"How you doin', Lotus Blossom?" A black man in exotic Asian garb was eyeing her. "You doan look too steady on your feets."

"I'm all right," Andrea panted, still feeling the shock of her precipitous dislocation. "But thanks for asking."

"Mebbe I should take you home and put you to bed."

She pushed away from the utility pole and started running. *Home ... bed.* Magic words. A sense of urgency hurried her on her way. She needed to get to sleep, to dream. *Beat him at his own game. ...* Andrea didn't know where Otto's mind was at that moment, in which world. But he surely was trying to get to sleep, and fast. All Andrea knew was that she had to get to sleep first. Whoever dreamed *first* — that person would be in control.

"Heidi!" a boy's voice called pleadingly. "Heidi, help me!"

Frightened, Andrea closed her ears to the plea and picked up her speed. She thought briefly about stopping at a drugstore for some sleeping pills, but didn't want to take the time. Besides, she had something at home that ought to do the trick, prescription medicine she'd taken for an illness earlier in the year. The drug had knocked her out and had given her a constant flow of vivid images running through her head like a speeded-up movie. If anything could make her sleep and dream, that little capsule should do it.

She reached her apartment building and ran into the elevator. There was one other passenger, a chic Chinese woman who took in Andrea's miniskirt and storm trooper boots and pointedly turned her gaze to the front of the car. The elevator reached Andrea's floor and she ran down the hallway, remembering only at the last moment that she had no key.

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The unlocked door opened to her ouch. Alarmed, Andrea bolted the oor behind her and cast a quick look round. Nothing seemed to be dis- urbed, and ... hallelujah, maybe there vas a God in Heaven after all — there vas her cello! Right where it was sup- osed to be.

In the bathroom she took out a mall capped vial from the medicine abinet. She swallowed two capsules, esitated, swallowed another.

She had fifteen, maybe twenty inutes before the drug took effect, ist enough time for a shower. Andrea ouldn't remember when she'd last felt o dirty. The hot spray of the shower, he steam, the medicine — they all hit er at the same time. She slipped on a obe and groggily made her way to her edroom. She stretched out full-length n the bed, happily yielding to its soft varmness. ...

...and gasped from the shock of the cold spray in her face. She grabbed the railing to keep her balance, but still almost fell — the footing was precarious on the oily, grimy deck. The stench was unbelievable; Andrea could see garbage floating in the water that slapped at the side of the ... oil tanker? She was on an oil tanker?

"Excuse me, ma'am," said a voice behind her.

She whirled around. "Joey?"

But it wasn't Joey. It was Otto Schrag.

"I'm sorry I startled you, ma'am," he said deferentially. "Captain D'Amico would like you to join him."

"Captain...?"

Following his gesture, Andrea could just make out the big swaggering Italian in command of this floating, self-contained world, and the glamorous television star who was clinging to his arm.

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Tony Richards writes that he is "26, married and lives just outside of London in the county of Essex. I have done over thirty jobs from publishing to park-keeping, but now make my living as a full-time freelance writer. Since 1980 I have sold a wide variety of stories and articles on both sides of the Atlantic and I am currently at work on a novel."

Discards

BY

TONY RICHARDS

After an unsuccessful day begging for money in Leicester Square, Robin Brookard realized the truth. That he would have to sleep rough. For the very first time in his life.

It took a long while for that plain truth to sink in. He had been brought up in a good middle-class home, educated at a grammar school, gone into a happy marriage and a secure career in finance. He had never even been camping, much less slept on a street. And so, when he finally came to accept the situation, it pained him more than he would ever have believed. The alcoholism, the sacking, the breakdown of his marriage. The slamming of both friendly and familial doors in his face. This last indignity seemed like a confirmation of them all. In this acceptance of it, he was accepting the loss of everything he'd ever known. Robin Brookard was thirty-two years old.

Reflexively, he took a swig fror the green bottle in his hand. The ver last of the cheap wine, as it turned out He let the bottle drop, hardly notice as it shattered at his feet. And for a instant he considered going to a hoste — the Salvation Army, maybe. Tha would be more than he could bear. T join the ranks of down-and-outs wa one thing. To openly acknowledge i to an official body was quite another Perhaps if he just curled up in a corner nobody would notice. Perhaps h might not even notice, himself. H turned, scattering glass shards with hi dusty shoes, and headed for th Thames.

Night was falling all across the city a faint and blurry mist accompanyin it so that the neon and the streetlight seemed as far away as stars. A chil wind had sprung up from nowhere and if Brookard had been more awar

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he might have realized that, no matter how many corners he turned, it kept on blowing right behind him.

All he noticed was the people, the clean, safe people, hurrying home from work, strolling to the theaters and the films. He saw their faces wrinkle with disgust, saw as they altered course to avoid him. They with their smart clothes and their smug, secure expressions. He with his raincoat already turning greasy, with his unshaven face and matted hair and shoelaces knotted a dozen times where they had snapped. He hated, *hated* them. Not least because he had once been one of them.

The wind scurried him on.

He found himself thinking of Jenny, of little Paul and baby Alexandra. He loved them all so much. And he could not believe the stories Jennifer had told in court, of what he'd done to them some nights. But then, he had been far too drunk to remember. *Oh God, oh God, please give me a second chance!* He found himself crying.

And the wind scurried him on.

He came, at long last, to the Thames, where the dark waters reflected the city lights. Once, he had considered it one of the most beautiful sights on Earth, that great river at night. Not now. It seemed pitiless and forbidding now. He began searching for somewhere to spend the night. But in every nook and cranny where he delved, however small, however deep, the cold wind followed him and drove him out. And scurried him on and on, upriver, like a piece of discarded flotsam blown against the tide.

At Charing Cross Bridge a gang of young thugs jeered at him from the opposite side of the street, hurled empty beer cans at him as he hurried past. One hit him on the side of the head, and his ear began to bleed.

A few hundred yards further up, a police patrol car drew up beside him. The driver shouted something — and he ran, quite terrified. He was not sure why. He had always been brought up to believe policemen were his friends.

It was dark and late by the time he left the Houses of Parliament behind. Fewer people around now; those who remained were timid and moved fast. He had been noticing the wind for quite some time, eventually given himself up to its propulsion. And, as though its task were over, the wind slowly died. There was absolute silence, perfect still. Brookard stood there, puzzled for a moment, glanced at the river and the looming shadow of the Commons, then looked across the street.

There, beyond a broken lamp, some ancient building had been razed to the ground. The other blocks still teetered upright somehow, but at their center lay a barren, rubble-filled square. And at the center of that square ... a bonfire. And people sitting round it. Derelicts. Winos. Tramps, just like himself. There was something strange about them, but Brookard felt sure

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that would pass. They were his new family. He crossed the street to join them.

"Don't want no junkies here," said the nearest silhouette, glancing up and marking Brookard's age as he approached. The young man might have smiled at that — exclusivity between tramps — except the sense of strangeness would not go away. There were an exact dozen in the group, and they were not seated as one would expect tramps to sit. Not slouching. Not huddled together. They were all bolt upright, forming a precise geometrical circle around the fire, each of them evenly spaced so that they marked the twelve hours of a clock. The tallest of them, placed at twelve o'clock, sat cross-legged with hands on knees, and seemed to be the leader. It was not he who had spoken, but the short man on his right.

"I'm not an addict," Brookard told him. "At least, not for that kind of...."

His voice trailed off. He was aware how stupid he must sound. Besides, he could not see whom he was speaking to, could not see any of them properly. The fire did peculiar things to his eyes. He could not escape the glare of the flames, yet could not look directly at them. There seemed to be something writhing deep within their collective heart. That was insane.

"Do you mind if I join you?" he asked.

"You already have, aintcha?"

"Then, do you mind if I sit down?"

"Free country."

He was already crouched down when the scream began to swell in his throat. Perhaps it was the change in angle, perhaps the fire had dropped just a little. But, for the first time, he saw them. Very, very clearly. He clamped down on the scream and felt sick.

They were the most ghastly group of human beings that his eyes had ever fallen on. The term human barely fitted them at all. Their faces had melted like wax, their bodies had merged with their moldering rags. His mind associated them more with golem, undead, mummies, than with stubbled old men half-asleep on subway steps. What had happened to them? It had to be more than drink.

His legs began pushing him up, almost without his thinking, when the short man laid a gnarled hand on his shoulder.

"Thought you wanted to sit down."

The fingers looked almost leprotic. Brookard gave in very easily under their pressure. He huddled there, just outside the circle, shivering, wanting to run.

As though he were not there, the tramps had turned back to the fire, staring at it in the way all tramps do. Except ... perhaps more intently. More ... *religiously?* They were making a humming noise which sounded almost

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like a Buddhist chant.

Oh God, please help me.

He was beginning to want a drink.

Oh God!

"God won't help you now," said the short man.

Did I just speak out loud? Brookard asked himself. He wasn't sure.

"God is for *them*, the clean people," the short man continued. "Not for the likes of you and me. He's *their* god."

"I've just begun to notice that," Brookard muttered. "*Them* and *us*, *theirs* and *ours*. Straight people and tramps, as though we were two separate races. I keep on wondering how I crossed the line. It all happened so fast."

And, before he knew it, he was crying into the dust and telling them about Jenny, the kids, the job, everything. It all flowed out as though he had recited it a dozen times. And he realized, with a shock, that he had never told the whole story beginning-to-end to anyone before, not all of it at once. As though they were his parents, his real family. They listened without interrupting, and when he was done they nodded their ghastly heads in sympathy.

"A bunch of kids back there," Brookard said. "They threw tin cans at me as though I were a dog. As though I weren't human anymore."

"Are you?"

"What kind of bloodyfool question is that? Of course I'm human."

At which the tramp turned to the tall man on his left, the apparent leader, and said, "A moot point, dontcha think, Padre?"

And the Padre uncrossed his legs to turn and stare at Brookard, revealing the worst face of them all. It looked as though someone had worked at the features with a ten-pound hammer, battered them completely out of shape. Only the nose was left untouched, as though by some great miracle. And the perfection of that sleek, aquiline nose made the face seem that much worse.

"Would you consider us human?" the Padre asked. He smiled at the responding silence. "No, I rather thought not."

They turned back to the fire, shutting him out once again. Not that they seemed offended; it was simply that they were busy with other matters. The short man fumbled within the voluminous folds of his overcoat and drew out two objects. The first was a magnum of red wine, three-quarters full — Brookard licked his lips nervously. The second, a plastic bag full of fresh cuts of meat. Brookard watched as the first slice was skewered on the end of a long stick and then suspended just over the flames.

As his eyes followed the meat, he looked for the first time into the direct center of the fire.

And this time, he did scream. Short and abrupt, as his hackles stood on end and his limbs flailed him away from the sight.

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It had been, he realized afterward, only the briefest of glances. But he *had* seen that writhing thing again. A tentacle, clawed at one end, had quivered toward the meat. A sharp, serrated beak had gnashed. And there were eyes. He was certain he had seen eyes.

Nobody else seemed to have noticed, either the creature or the scream. Or else they didn't care. Perhaps he needed that drink even worse than he'd imagined. Perhaps the lack of alcohol was doing strange things to his mind.

The Padre was talking once again, without turning around this time. His tone was even and monotonous as though he were speaking from a pulpit — but his words were directed at Brookard without doubt.

He was recounting his own life story, and the story of his fall. *Padre* was not a mere nickname; he genuinely had been a clergyman, a country cleric of the old, respected school. His life had consisted of harvest festivals, of summer fetes and rummage sales, of tea with the women's guild. Until he had stopped to think, really think, about the religion he'd always preached. His worries had made him drink, and the drink had made him careless, and one Sunday morning he had stood in the pulpit, swaying a little, and voiced his new conclusions to the world.

"I was defrocked," he chuckled. "And my heresy was simply this. I told them that God exists, but he is not the One God. I told them that, when a sufficient number of people believe in a new god, then that new deity comes into existence. Necessity is the mother of invention, even of the holy and supreme. The Romans were a warlike race, and hence a god of war existed. The Plains Indians needed rain, and hence there was a god to conjure it. The strength of minds combined as one, the strength of wills and wants and basic needs — *that* is what creates a god. And all it takes is enough people to believe." He stopped, looked straight at Brookard. "Do you know how many tramps there are in London?"

It seemed a rhetorical question. Even if it wasn't, Brookard was too confused, too afraid, to reply. He tried to shrug, but all he did was shudder.

The flow of conversation had already moved on. The others round the fire were recounting their own stories. For his sole benefit. As if to prove a point.

There was Harry, who had worked at an iron foundry until he'd seen his best friend crushed to pulp in a machine. There was Rose — barely recognizable as a woman — who had raised four fine children, cared for her husband, and then, when she'd had a nervous breakdown, found that there was no one competent to care for her. There was Pete, who'd put everything he owned into his business and then gone bankrupt when his partner cheated him. Other stories, just as bad. The teacher who could not control his kids. The bank clerk who'd been made re-

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dundant after thirty faithful years. Others. Each different. Yet each with one strong underlying theme. They had all been good and earnest members of society — until they'd started having problems and society had thrown them on the rubbish heap.

They came at last to the short man. His name was Corporal Alf. World War I, Verdun, the Somme. Over the top fifty times. Huddling in a muddy trench for weeks. He'd saved the life of an officer, been wounded in the act, been shipped home and awarded the V.C. And society had rewarded him with a job sweeping streets. Soon, he was too drunk to manage even that.

At the mention of drink, Brookard felt the thirst grow in him once again. He stretched out for the bottle of red wine, but it was moved away from him and began being passed round the circle. He had not been accepted by them yet. One final hurdle, it seemed, remained to be leaped.

"Want to see something funny?" Corporal Alf asked.

When Brookard nodded, the old man turned around, pulled up his coat and his loose, tattered shirt.

Brookard felt ill. Even in the darkness, the man's back was completely white, crinkled and furrowed into a relief map of another world. A seething mass of scar tissue. There was no healthy flesh at all.

"What's so funny?" Brookard heard himself ask.

"Didn't get it in the War, that's what," the man replied. "Jerry didn't do that. Pair of Cockney kids did that. I was asleep on a bench in Battersea Park, just an old war hero minding his own business. And they poured petrol on me and set me alight. That's when I threw away my V.C. and joined the Brotherhood."

"Brotherhood?" Brookard glanced at the Padre. He seemed the natural one to ask.

"The Brotherhood of Discards," the Padre replied. "I asked you once how many tramps you thought there were in London. You didn't answer me."

Brookard thought a moment. "I don't know."

"No one does for sure. Thousands, certainly. Perhaps even tens of thousands. Our numbers are swelling all the time — drug addicts, homeless teenagers from the North. And that's just one city. What about the country? What about the Western World? Perhaps," he added, "we shall outnumber the clean people one day."

Brookard thought enviously of Jenny and the children safe in their new home. He thought of going there with a hundred of his kind and ... no, that was horrible! He ought not think such things.

The wind had sprung up again, keening softly, forming a background to the Padre's quiet words. The fire rose a little. In the corner of Brookard's vision, something wriggled and then lay intently still.

"Consider," the Padre was saying,

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"we no longer belong to the human race. It has discarded us, and we have disowned it. Its laws are not our laws. Its God cannot serve us." He smiled again, broken, predatory teeth reflecting in the firelight. "Our needs are that much simpler. Something to drink, a morsel to eat, somewhere to spend the night. Protection from the bitter cold. Salvation from the thugs who beat us up. What better to provide all these things than a god?"

"You're mad!"

"Am I? Is it really insane that that great need should bring to pass a new and awful god? A nameless god? The god of the discarded? Look into the fire, Brookard."

"I never told you my name!"

"Look into the flames."

And for the first time Brookard looked properly at the fire, and he found that he could not look away. It was there, had been there all along. A nightmare. An alcohol-sodden obscenity. A delirium tremens of a god. But a god nonetheless. It raised its claws toward him.

"What does it want?"

"Worship him."

"Oh my God!"

"He is *your* god now."

He was almost on his knees when he managed to break away. He struggled upright, tottered as though all the muscles had gone from his legs. Half expecting them to leap up and grab hold of him and drag him down again. They did not. Every deformed face was turned toward him as they watched him patiently.

"I won't do it."

They were all smiling.

"I won't give in to that thing. I... I haven't sunk that low. There may not be much chance, but I'll at least try to get back. I'm a human being. I'm a man. I won't go through with this."

He realized he was babbling. Even worse, he was kidding himself and failing to succeed. Jenny, take him back? His onetime employers, return him to his post? No chance in all the world. He turned round all the same, began to walk away, aware of their smiles on his back.

Perhaps if they had tried to stop him it would have been better. The responsibility would have been removed from his hands. As it was, he had to take each step himself, and each one became harder. The wind had sprung up again, freezing him to the bone. He finally came to a stop at the outskirts of the firelight, where the bright glow of the flames was swallowed by the darkness of the world beyond. And he looked at the city where he planned to sleep.

It seemed as hostile as a Siberian waste, bleak and forbidding as a graveyard on a moor. The temperature had dropped abruptly; crystals of frost had worked their way into every exposed crack. Motor cars shot by with terrifying speed and, in the distance, somebody was shouting, somebody was throwing bottles, looking for trouble.

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Looking for someone else to hurt.

Ahead of him: discomfort, danger, quite possibly death. Behind: the warmth of a bonfire and the company of friends. The bottle of red wine. He did so desperately want a drink. Needed. Craved. A *drink!*

The decision was made. He stumbled back so fast that he almost pitched headlong into the bonfire. The Padre held the bottle out as one would hold a sacrament. Brookard snatched hold of it, pressed the neck against his lips and tipped his head back till — he stopped, his mouth full of the fluid as the first wave of nausea swept over him. It was not wine. It. Was. Not. Wine.

"If they treat us like animals," he heard Corporal Alf say, "why shouldn't we treat them the same?"

And yes, that seemed right. Human beings did, after all, belong to another race. Not cannibalism, just convenience.

He swallowed the mouthful, continued to gulp until the sticky, lukewarm fluid was all gone. And he was satiated, felt better than he had felt in his whole former life. Light-headed and happy. The stars seemed close enough to touch now. A warm glow lit the world. And that glow emanated from the heart of the bonfire.

Brookard knelt down before it, bowed his head, and yielded. And he did not shudder as the creature reached out of the flames. Spectral claws prickled his neck. Tentacles which had no substance ran across his face. He felt his flesh melting beneath their touch, sensed his cheekbones run down to his jowls, his chin become one with his throat, his brow collapse like plastic in a kiln. He had once been thought quite handsome; now, he didn't care. Handsomeness was for the humans. There were better things in life. Such as being safe. Such as having a god who was by far stronger than theirs. Brookard belonged to him now. Totally to him.

They gave him the first slice of meat, and he ate it greedily, letting the juice drip between his wizened fingers. It was soft and sweet and tasted quite like venison. He had always imagined it would taste like that.

The following night, Brookard went out with the others, helped them catch a young woman out jogging by herself. They sat around the fire, ate, and prayed, and then they took the bones and hurled them over the embankment. The river carried them down to the sea, and all was quiet again.

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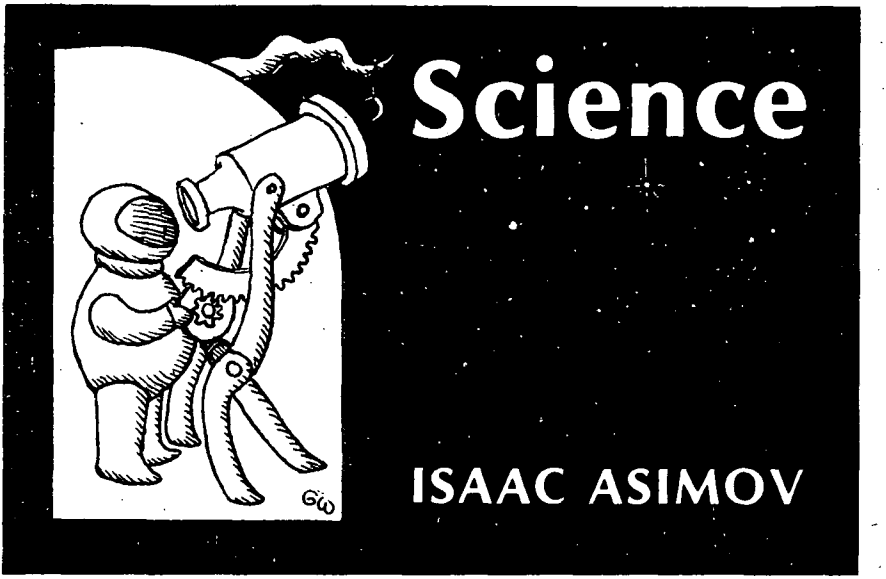

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

WHERE ALL THE SKY IS SUNSHINE

A friend of mine, who is a publisher (almost all my friends seem to be writers, editors, or publishers, oddly enough — or perhaps that is not so odd), asked me to do a book of limericks for children.

"Clean ones," he said, severely, having heard of some of my previous exploits in this direction. "That is, if you know how to do that kind."

"Of course I know how," I said, in the aggrieved tone I use when someone suggests there is some kind of writing I can't do if I put my mind to it.

"All right, then. I want fifty."

So a week later, I brought in the limericks and he said, "Are you sure you've got fifty there?"

I couldn't believe it. He had actually presented me with the straight line I had dreamed of. Masking that, however, I said, in an offhand manner, "May I read you the last limerick?" and then did so:

50. Finish

Some say that my rhyme-schemes are shifty.
Some say that my meter is nifty.
I don't care either way,
For what I have to say
Is I'm finished. Please count them. There's fifty!

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He was staggered. "I don't believe you," he said. "You're improvising. Let's see that."

I showed him the page. It was there.

"How did you know I would question the number?" he demanded.

"You ask? You with your unlovely, suspicious nature?"

(Not so, please understand, for he is a delightful person — as are just about all my writer/editor/publisher friends, to my unending happiness.)

And the best part of the situation is that my friend was so overawed by the aptness of the last limerick that he accepted all fifty without asking for a single revision or substitution.

This shows the power of a strong finish, and that brings me back to the 1903 article in *Munsey's Magazine*, which I was discussing in last month's essay.

As you may recall, the 1903 article by Ernest Green Dodge, A.M., entitled *Can Men Visit the Moon?*, listed five ways by which the lunar visit might be possible, every one of which was totally hopeless, but omitted the one method — rocketry — which was indeed possible, and which was eventually used.

In the last section of the article, however, he considers briefly the question: "What is the moon good for, even if man succeeds in reaching it?"

He points out that it is lifeless, airless, and waterless, and that it is "unspeakably cold" during its long night. In this, he is perfectly correct, but he then goes on to make the curious error of saying that the Moon's temperature is "below the freezing point even at noon."

To be sure, it was not for another quarter of a century that direct and delicate measurements were made of the temperature of the Moon's surface. Still, considering that the Sun's rays strike the Moon's surface in as concentrated a manner as they strike the Earth, and that on the Moon there are no currents of air nor water to carry off the heat and disperse it more or less evenly over the globe, and that on the Moon the sunshine continues without a break for fourteen days at a time in any one place, it was reasonable (and, in fact, inevitable), even in 1903, to conclude that high temperatures were reached during the Lunar day.

Actually, the temperature of the Moon at its equator at noon is just a trifle above the boiling point of water.

Still, if Dodge was wrong in the letter, he was correct in the spirit, since a temperature that high would make the Moon even more unpleasant than one that was below freezing.

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Dodge points out that despite all this, "men could abide there for a time in thick-walled, air-tight houses, and could walk out of doors in air-tight divers' suits." We call them space suits now, and the astronauts would live underground, in all likelihood, rather than in "houses," but the question still arises: Why go to all the trouble?

Dodge gives five answers, which manage to touch all the bases, in my opinion. Let consider each of them in turn.

1 — "Scientists would find in the lunar wastes a fresh field for exploration."

The year 1903 was, of course, in the heyday of Polar exploration. Intrepid men were heading for both the North and South Poles with concentrated determination. Robert E. Peary was to reach the former in 1909 and Roald Amundsen the latter in 1911.

It may be that Dodge had that sort of exploration in mind, and, if so, he didn't sufficiently count on technological advance. Satellites, placed in orbit about the Moon, sent back tens of thousands of photographs to Earth, and from these a complete map of the Moon was worked out without any human being leaving Earth. That left virtually nothing for the classical explorer of the Peary/Amundsen type to do.

The statement remains correct, however. Scientists *would* find the Moon a field for exploration, if we're talking about the search for subtle bits of geological, physical, and chemical evidence that would shed light on the past history of the Moon (and, for that matter, of the Sun, the Earth, and the Solar system generally). This is already being done with the Moon rocks brought back by the Apollo astronauts, but it could be done far more effectively and in far greater detail if there were a permanent base on the Moon.

2 — "Astronomers could plant their telescopes there, free from their most serious hindrance, the earth's atmosphere."

No argument here at all. We are planning to put moderately sizable telescopes in orbit about Earth, so one might suppose the Moon is not really needed. Suppose, though, we wanted to make use of a really large system of radio telescopy outside the growing interference of the radio waves emitted by Earth's heightening technology? The platform afforded by the far side of the Moon, with over three thousand kilometres of rock shielding it from Earth, would be unparalled. (At the time Dodge was writing, Guglielmo Marconi's feat of sending radio waves across the Atlantic was less than two years old. We can't fault Dodge for not dreaming of anything like radio astronomy. Who could have done so, then?)

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3 — "Tourists of the wealthy and adventurous class would not fail to visit the satellite, and costly hotels must be maintained for their accommodation."

This was 1903, remember, when scions of the British ruling families were expected to go out to Africa or India and help build the Empire, and where the upper classes, bereft of honest work, were forced to engage in such trivialities as mountain climbing and big-game hunting. (Do my prejudices show?) Nevertheless, I am sure there will be Lunar tourism eventually, but I hope it will be, to as great an extent as possible, for *all* "classes."

4 — "Then it is quite probable that veins of precious metals, beds of diamonds, and an abundance of sulphur might be discovered on a world of so highly volcanic a character."

Undoubtedly, Dodge felt the Moon to be "highly volcanic" in nature because he assumed the craters to be the product of once active volcanoes. It is quite settled now that the craters are the result of meteoric bombardment in the early stages of the formation of the Solar system, when bits of matter were still in the process of coalescing into worlds. Still, the larger strikes might well have broken the crust and allowed an upwelling of magma to form the lunar maria, so we'll let that go.

But "veins of precious metals, beds of diamonds"? We now know that the Moon is no bonanza of silver, gold, platinum, or diamonds, but let us grant that Dodge could not have known that in 1903.

Even so, suppose that precious metals and diamonds *were* found on the Moon in great abundance. So what? The task of going out there to get them and then bringing them back would so add to their cost that it would be far cheaper to continue to scrabble it all out of Earth's weary crust.

Even if, somehow, technological advance made it possible to bring back all those "precious" things cheaply, it would be of no use. Dodge makes the mistake of confusing costly objects with valuable ones. Gold, silver, platinum and diamonds are expensive and coveted only because they are rare. Diamonds can be used in industry as abrasives, platinum for laboratory-ware, gold for filling in teeth, and silver for photographic film, but if all these materials were as common as iron, all the uses we could think up for them would be insufficient to consume more than a small fraction of what was available. (This is especially true of gold, which is as near to being a useless material as one can imagine.)

There would be left their use as ornaments; for these things, gold and diamonds in particular, are undeniably beautiful. If, however, they were so common that there would be enough to supply everyone with such orna-

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ments, they would no longer be desired. I don't think it is necessary to argue the point.

It follows, then, that it doesn't matter whether precious metals or gems are to be found on the Moon or not. What we *do* need to make it worthwhile to go to the Moon is some product that is *valuable*, rather than costly, and which can be used on the Moon or in nearby space.

Dodge is closer to the mark with his mention of sulfur. Sulfur is not a beautiful substance, or anything to be coveted for itself. It is, however, the basis of sulfuric acid which, setting aside the basic staples of energy, air, water and salt is the single most useful substance in the chemical industries.

But if Dodge is wrong in his examples, he is right in spirit, for the Lunar crust can be used as a source of various structural metals, of clay, of soil, of cement, of glass, of oxygen — all of which can be prime building materials for structures in space. Indeed, if we are to have a space technology, it will be supported in the main by mining stations on the Moon.

Next Dodge goes on to the fifth use, and we get the strong finish I spoke of in the introduction to this essay. He says, "The world's population is capable of great increase ... And the world's need for motive power (energy) is increasing much more rapidly than the population."

In this, Dodge is utterly correct, but it is so obvious, even in 1903, that any thinking person would have seen this if he had bothered to think in that direction. Nevertheless, I suppose that very few people, in 1903, would have felt any alarm concerning the matter. Western humanity was still riding the tide of 19th Century optimism, and it took World War I — still eleven years in the future — to shatter that.

Dodge, however, went on to put his finger on something that marks him as a man two generations ahead of his time. He says, "Our supply of coal and timber is limited, and will all too soon be exhausted."

In Dodge's time, petroleum fractions were already being used as fuel, but still only to a very minor extent. Dodge did not foresee that the proliferation of the internal-combustion engine in everything from cars to planes would, within half a century, lift petroleum to the status of humanity's prime fuel, casting his "coal and timber" into the shade.

That does not affect the cogency of his remark, however, for petroleum is far more limited in quantity than coal is, and, unlike timber, is not renewable. In short, coal and petroleum will both some day be exhausted — petroleum long before coal — and timber alone cannot support our present population and technology. What, then, can we do?

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Dodge is aware of alternate sources of energy. He says, "Waterfalls can do much. Windmills can do not a little." The implication is clear that they cannot, by themselves, do enough, however. There are other alternate sources that he doesn't mention: energy from waves, ocean currents, tides, temperature differences between the surface and depths of both land and sea, and so on. All are, or can be, useful, but perhaps all together will not be enough.

He does not mention (or even dream of, I suppose) nuclear energy, though its existence had been discovered a few years earlier and H. G. Wells had speculated on the matter as early as 1901. Still, 1903 is a bit soon and I won't scold Dodge for missing it.

Dodge, however, goes on to say, "Solar engines, with concave mirrors to gather the sun's rays, have lately been put to practical use, and these in the future will accomplish wonders, yet even their resources, in our heavy, cloudy atmosphere are not boundless. But solar engines would work to much better advantage on the moon than on the earth..."

I find this remarkable. He was forecasting solar power stations in space forty years before I was speculating about them in my short story "Reason" and sixty years before scientists began thinking seriously of them. I wonder if this might not be the very first reasonable mention of such a thing. (If any of my Gentle Readers knows of an earlier case, in science or in science fiction, I would like to hear of it.)

To be sure, Dodge thinks of solar power in terms of a concentration of the Sun's rays, a concentration that would deliver more heat to a small spot than would otherwise take place. Large mirrors would focus light upon a water reservoir, bringing it to a boil, and producing steam. We would thus have a steam engine, with sunlight taking the place of burning coal as the producer of the steam. This would have the advantage that the Sun, unlike coal, would never be exhausted — or, at least, not for billions of years.

Dodge, in explaining the advantage of the Moon, clearly shows he is thinking of a steam engine, for he says the lunar engine would work better "owing partly to the absence of cloud and haze, but chiefly to the low temperatures at which the condensed vapors could be discharged from the cylinders." (Here again, you see, Dodge labors under the feeling that the Lunar surface would be very cold even with the Sun blazing down.)

By 1903, however, an increasingly important use for steam engines was that of turning a generator to produce an electric current. That use has become steadily more important in the decades since, but even in 1903, it might have been possible to wonder if sunlight on the Moon might not be

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turned into electricity directly, instead of having to move around Robin Hood's barn by way of the steam engine. After all, such direct conversion ("photoelectricity") was already known.

In 1840, the French physicist Alexandre Edmond Becquerel showed that light could produce certain chemical changes which, in turn, could produce electric currents. This wasn't quite a *direct* conversion of light to electricity but it showed a connection.

Something more direct involved the element selenium, which, along with its sister-element, tellurium, much resembles sulfur in its chemical properties. Of the two, tellurium, although the less common, was the first discovered.

Tellurium was discovered in 1783 by an Austrian mineralogist, Franz Joseph Müller. The discovery was confirmed in 1798 by the German chemist, Martin Heinrich Klaproth, who was careful to give Müller full credit. It was Klaproth who gave the new element its name, tellurium, from the Latin word for "earth." He chose this name apparently because he had earlier discovered an element he had named "uranium" after the then-newly-discovered planet, Uranus, which had in turn been named for the Greek god of the sky. The two elements were thus named for Earth and Sky.

In 1817, the Swedish chemist Jöns Jakob Berzelius discovered a trace of a foreign substance in sulfuric acid, something he took to be a compound of tellurium. On closer examination, he decided, in 1818, that what he had found was a substance containing not tellurium but an unknown element similar to it in properties. He wanted to balance the "Earth" that tellurium presented, and since "Sky" had already been used, he chose "Moon," and named the new element "selenium," from the Greek goddess of the Moon.

Selenium exists in different forms, depending on the arrangement of its atoms. One of these forms is silvery-grey in color and is sometimes called "grey selenium." This shows certain metallic properties and it has, for instance, a small tendency to conduct an electric current, though other forms of the element do not.

The tendency is quite small, but in 1873, Willoughby Smith noted that when grey selenium is exposed to sunlight, the electrical conductivity of the element increases markedly. Once in the dark, the conductivity fades off, after a short interval, to the original low level again. The discovery aroused no particular interest at the time, but it was the first demonstration of a *direct* conversion of light to electricity.

Then, in 1888, the German physicist Heinrich Rudolf Hertz was ex-

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perimenting with electric currents being forced to leap across an air gap (experiments that resulted in the discovery of radio waves). He found that when ultraviolet light shone on the negatively-charged side of the gap, the electric current leaped the gap more easily than otherwise. This time the world of science listened, and Hertz is usually credited with the discovery of the "photoelectric effect" though it existed in Smith's discovery of selenium's behavior fifteen years before.

The photoelectric effect comes about because light can knock electrons out of atoms, given the proper wavelengths and the proper atoms. Physicists had no explanation for the exact details of the effect until 1905, when Albert Einstein applied the then-new quantum theory to the problem and won a Nobel Prize as a result.

However, the practical application of an observed phenomenon does not have to wait for a proper scientific explanation.

In 1888, for instance, only a year after Hertz's demonstration of the photoelectrical effect, two German physicists, Johann P. L. Elster and Hans Geitel, were working together on the phenomenon.

They were able to demonstrate that some metals displayed the photoelectric effect more easily than others. (That is, electrons were more easily knocked free from some types of atoms than from others.) The alkali metals were most sensitive to the effect, and the most common alkali metals were sodium and potassium. Elster and Geitel therefore worked with an alloy of sodium and potassium and found that a current could be forced through it and across a gap without difficulty in the presence of visible light, but not in darkness.

This was the first "photelectric cell" or "photocell," and it could be used to measure the intensity of light. The greater the intensity, the greater the electric current, and while the former was hard to measure directly, the latter was very easy to measure.

Though scientists could, and did, use the sodium-potassium photocell for scientific purposes, it wasn't very practical for everyday life. Sodium and potassium are highly active and dangerous substances and require the most careful handling.

At about the same time as Elster and Geitel were producing their photocell, however, an American inventor, Charles Fritts, was making use of the odd property of grey selenium which Smith had earlier observed. Fritts prepared little wafers of selenium, coated with a thin layer of gold. He incorporated them into an electric circuit in such a way that a current would flow only when the selenium wafers (another type of photocell) were illuminated.

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Photocells, then, had been in existence for about four years when Dodge wrote his article in *Munsey's Magazine*. They were, as yet, out-of-the-way items and I could scarcely blame Dodge if he had not heard of them. What's more, even if he had heard of them, they scarcely seemed, at the time, to be more than small gadgets, condemned to minor uses forever and certainly not candidates for the large scale conversion of sunlight to useful energy. In fact, despite the magniloquent claims of Fritts, the selenium photocell converted less than one percent of the light that fell upon it into electricity — a fearfully low efficiency.

Still the selenium photocells could be used for interesting minor purposes. The most familiar of these, to the general public, is the "magic eye."

Suppose that a door is equipped with some arrangement that would keep it open if allowed to work unimpeded. Suppose, further, that a small electric current can trigger a relay which would activate a larger one that would serve to pull the door closed against that arrangement. The small electric current runs through a circuit that incorporates a selenium photocell.

Next suppose a small source of light at one side of the door sends a thin beam across the door to the selenium photocell on the other side. As long as that thin beam exists, the selenium photocell permits the passage of the small current that triggers the relay and keeps the doors closed.

If, at any time, there is an interruption of the light beam, even for a short time, the selenium photocell, momentarily in darkness, refuses to permit the current through. The small current fails, the relay is untriggered, and there is nothing to keep the doors closed. The door therefore, moves open until the light is unimpeded and then it moves shut again.

A person approaching the door blocks the light with his body just before he reaches it. The door opens "of itself" in time to let him through and then closes again. (I've always thought that if someone didn't know about magic eyes, you might have him watch you and, as you approach the door, you might shout "Open Sesame." For a bewildered moment, the observer might think he was in Ali Baba's tale in the *Arabian Nights*. That's what Arthur Clarke means when he says that advanced technology is equivalent to magic to the uninitiated.)

The selenium photocell, and photocells generally, were not perceptibly improved until the mid-20th Century. In 1948, scientists at Bell Telephone invented the transistor (see "Silicon Life After All, December 1982) and that changed everything. The transistor works because electrons can be

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knocked loose from atoms such as those of silicon or germanium. Research into transistors therefore meant research into something that might display a photoelectric effect.

This was not immediately obvious, to be sure, and when Darryl Chapin of Bell Telephone was looking for some source of power that could be used for telephone systems in isolated areas (something that could keep the systems working when conventional sources failed) he tried selenium photocells. They didn't work. Not enough sunlight could be converted to electricity to make it a practical hope.

Elsewhere in Bell Telephone, however, Calvin Fuller was working with the kind of silicon wafers used in transistors, and it was found, more or less by accident, that sunlight would produce an electric current in them. Fuller and Chapin got together and they produced the first practical "solar cell."

Even the first solar cells they put together were 4 percent efficient and, eventually, they got the efficiency up to 16 percent.

From that point on, it became possible to dream of solar power in a manner that was more sophisticated than the concave mirrors that Dodge imagined. Suppose there were square miles of solar cells set up in some desert area, where sunshine was relatively steady. Would they not produce a steady flow of non-polluting, never-ending electricity in large quantities?

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The catch is that a solar cell, though individually inexpensive, would, in the enormous quantities needed to coat a sufficiently large area of Earth's space, be prohibitively costly. Add to that the vast expense of proper maintenance after installation. Nevertheless, solar cells have been used in minor ways, such as the powering of orbiting satellites, and have proved completely successful there. (I use a pocket calculator, powered by solar cells, so that it has no battery and will never need one.)

What we must do is to make solar cells cheaper, more efficient and more reliable. Instead of having to use single large crystals of silicon from which thin slices can be shaved off, it might become possible to use amorphous silicon made up of tiny crystals jammed together every which way — which would be *much* cheaper to produce.

And instead of setting up fields upon fields of solar cells, covering vast tracts of desert land, where the air is not perfectly transparent (especially when the Sun is low in the sky), we might set it up on the Moon, where, for two weeks at a time, all the sky is sunshine and there is no air to interfere — or even in space, where there is hardly ever any night and where all the sky is sunshine nearly always.

In this way, Dodge's romantic dream might finally come true.

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Solitario's Eyes

BY

LUCIUS SHEPARD

Eusebio Kul, a healer of the Patuca tribe, and Claudio Portales, who was the captain of militia for the province of Nueva Esperanza, had a violent misunderstanding one day during the season of storms in Puerto Morada. Eusebio had been treating the captain's wife Amelita for complaints associated with her pregnancy; she was an Indian woman and, despite having been married to the captain and living in the capital for three years, she had not forsaken the traditions of her people, trusting more therefore to Eusebio's remedies than to those of the fruit company's doctor. Indeed, it was rumored that her adherence to Indian custom had been the cause behind her husband's sudden exodus from the capital: why else would a man so well connected, of such aristocratic lineage, be posted to a remote jungle station, a station where the prospects for meritorious service were limited to rare incidents of guerrilla activity — rare, because the jungle was too pestilent for all but the hardiest of guerrillas.

Captain Portales — tall and pale, a model of punctilio with a flaring moustache, polished boots, and a Castilian accent — stood out like a sore thumb from the ordinary run of his troops, who were Indian, bandy-legged and copper-skinned; they drank heavily, fell asleep on sentry duty, and frequently deserted. Dismayed by their malaise, Captain Portales, too, began to drink, sitting all day in the sidewalk café of the Hotel Circo del Mar, a vantage point from which he could oversee the comings and goings of the townspeople and thus preserve an illusion of his authority. His sole energetic action consisted of tracking down those who spread the rumors about his wife and beating them; but though he beat them

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viciously, he never denied the truth of the rumors, and so they continued to proliferate.

Amelita, whispered the rumormongers, had kept pigs in the living room of their home in the capital, spread straw on the kitchen floor, chanted old Patuca songs on the sabbath, and fallen asleep during grand affairs. ... All habits in complete accord with the best traditions of her people, but entirely unacceptable to capital society, and, no doubt, designed by her to embarrass the captain. For Amelita, being a great beauty, taller by a head than is common among women of the Patuca, statuesque and raven-haired, was a willful creature, and though she had willingly married the captain, it had been for reason of the financial benefits which would accrue to her family in Truxillo; how else, then, should she treat a man whom she had so easily cozened, who would support her every excess in return for the pleasures of her body? How else other than with contempt and disrespect?

Such a woman, suggested certain pundits of the town, was marked out for a violent destiny, and in this regard they watched the evolution of the most scurrilous rumor of all: that Amelita and Eusebio had been, as the Patuca idiom would have it, "lowering the hammock," this an allusion to the fact that hammock ropes have a tendency to stretch under a doubled weight and strenuous exertions.

It was generally held that Captain Portales, dispirited by his poor prospects and malingering troops, was working himself up into a killing rage, and Eusebio seemed the likeliest victim; but no one thought of counseling Eusebio to caution or doing anything by the way of countering the flow of events. Doing something might compound the problem, bring retribution from the capital. As it was, the murder would occur and the captain would receive his comeuppance, because an act of murder resonates far beyond the actual event, and whether or not its perpetrator goes unpunished by the courts, the anima created in process of the act will hunt back down the pathways of the murderer's blood and reap its own vengeance, if not upon him, then upon his relations. ... At least, so the Patuca interpret the bad luck visited upon murderers and their families, and Eusebio, had he been consulted, would have agreed with this interpretation.

The town was situated on a bay enclosed by two jungled slopes of the Picos Bonitos: green sugarloaf mountains whose peaks were overhung with rain clouds at every season of the year. Dozens of thatched huts dotted the hillsides above the town, themselves surrounded by fenced-in plots of bananas and corn, and when the hurricanes swept up from the south these huts were lifted like ruffled brown birds and shredded in the wind and tossed down to litter the beaches. A row of white concrete office buildings

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belonging to the fruit company ringed the bay, and a concrete dock stuck out a rigid tongue into the jade green water; behind the offices lay a hatchwork of dusty streets lined with huts and several stucco buildings serving as cantinas and shops.

Not much traffic moved along the streets: a few battered trucks, squabbling children, slinking dogs. ... Once a turn-of-the-century travel writer had made cursory mention of the town, characterizing it "an idle place of proven shadows," and thus it had remained. On the northernmost slope demarking the bay, at the water's edge and facing inland across a cobbled square toward the pink stucco facade of the Hotel Circo del Mar, there stood a massive church of gray stone guarded by two haunted-looking bell towers, empty of bells. Its name was Santa Maria del Onda, and its walls were pocked with bullet holes, some of which were pointed out to the occasional tourist as resulting from the execution of a notorious American adventurer nearly a hundred years before.

This might or might not have been true according to historians, but the townspeople believed it, and their belief was founded on a truth implicit in the town's existence: that Puerto Morada was one of those frayed ends of the earth where things might occur which had not occurred for centuries and might never again, where old laws still held intermittant sway, and what passed for the truth in Puerto Morada might well have been a lie or fantasy fifteen miles down the coast in Puerto Castillo, where the harbor was deep enough for the big tankers, and vultures stalked the beaches pecking at transparent fingerlings washed up by the tides, where the streets were lit by the red neons of brothels, and whores slept in their hammocks with their feet out the windows until well past noon.

Now Eusebio lived apart from the town, amid a palm grove on Punta Manabique, that spine of land forming the southernmost enclosure of the bay; his home was a one-room shack set upon driftwood pilings, and contained a charcoal stove and a hammock and stacks of spiral-ring notebooks which he secured from Don Guillermo, his American friend who was in charge of office supplies for the fruit company. It was a simple place — one might even call it impoverished — but Eusebio was content. My parlor is the beach, he would say, and my living room the sea; and he spent hours sitting on the sand, studying the spinning shadows of the beachvine, the patterns of the waves and the repetitive occupations of the gulls.

Patterns were Eusebio's obsession. Whenever a storm struck the bay, he would take one of his notebooks and squat as close as he dared to the shore and attempt to record the traceries of lightning which detonated beyond the reef. He was convinced that they were writing messages transmitted by one of the dying gods of the Patuca, hoping to

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communicate this final wisdom to his children on earth. Don Guillermo made light of Eusebio's conviction, telling him that the storms were only meteorological phenomena, circular masses of hot air interacting with the colder zones, and Eusebio agreed. "All great truths are complementary," he said. Don Guillermo shook his head, woeful, because he had great respect for Eusebio's intelligence and wondered how such a man could waste himself in scratching out forked lines on page after page of notebook paper.

But patterns were not Eusebio's sole obsession; he was equally fascinated by oddities, and to this end, in a corral constructed of driftwood railings behind his house, he kept a midget bull, a five-legged sheep, and a horse which had been blind since birth. He called the bull Imaginación, the sheep Magico, and the horse he had named Solitario. The horse was his favorite. It was a little roan, barely twelve hands high, and its eyes were nacreous globes, as luminous and many-hued as the finest of pearls; if you looked closely at them, you saw they were composed of layer after layer of glistening filaments and fibers, an infinity of pattern lodged within the sockets.

The animals were Eusebio's treasure. They had come to him separately: the bull and the sheep were gifts from recovered patients, and he had found the horse when it was newborn lying under an aguacate bush, abandoned there by some farmer who had not known its worth and who'd had neither the time or the money to care for it. They had been sent him by the gods, Eusebio thought, to acknowledge him as their agent, to ratify his wisdom in the following of the old ways, and for a purpose. ... That purpose had not yet been made clear. Though he conjectured that Solitario's eyes might hold the basic pattern from which all others derived, his conjecturing did not have the ring of wisdom; he looked each day into the eyes, feeding Solitario sugar to calm him, but learned nothing. He was in no hurry to sort it out, however: sooner or later the purpose would manifest, and he would understand.

Every afternoon at precisely four o'clock, Amelita came walking down the beach from town, stepping nimbly between the latticework of beachvine, her head covered in an embroidered shawl; she could have ridden in Captain Portales's jeep, but her mother had walked until her ninth month, and in this matter, as in all things, Amelita held to tradition.

She entered without knocking, acknowledged Eusebio with a glimmering smile, disrobed and stood for his inspection. Even in this, her seventh month, she was lovely. The sun striking through the brushwood walls barred her black hair and coppery skin with gold diagonals; her breasts were long and slightly pendant, and the nipples looked dark and swollen in the half-light; her abdomen was a lush curve that signaled completion like the

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swell of an equatorial wave; and the whites of her eyes were so luminous they seemed to be floating up from the shadowy planes of her face. When Eusebio came near, she lowered her lids and folded her hands demurely over the tuft of her secret hair.

Eusebio rubbed her belly with herbs and chanted; he knelt facing her and listened to the child, his ear pressed against her taut skin, and he sang to the child, making voluptuous passes in the air around Amelita's hips. Every now and then he lost his concentration, overpowered by the mild roasting odor of her flesh mingled with sweat and lavender. He wanted to bury his face in her loins, to kiss the upcurve of her abdomen, but even though he knew Amelita might welcome his attentions, he realized she was a creature of erratic and deep-flowing moods which could change her from an angel one minute into a demon the next. ... Who could predict what she might tell her husband? And so he restrained himself and completed his treatment, singing softly to the child of the world it must soon enter and how it would suffer and the things it must know to endure.

Afterward, as was their custom, he fixed Amelita a cup of black coffee dosed with sapodilla root, and they talked. She sat on the edge of the hammock, balancing the coffee on her knees, while he squatted against the wall.

"You have heard the rumors about us?" she asked, lowering her lashes and drinking.

"Yes." He did not trust himself to say more than yes, for though he was not in love with her, he understood that it would take the slightest effort on his part, the least invitation on hers, and he would fall in love.

"I have told Claudio they are lies." She smiled at him over the top of the cup. "But of course he is suspicious. You must be careful not to offend him."

He nodded.

Thereafter they spoke of her relatives in Truxillo and the new priest who had come to Puerto Morada and other unimportant matters, and precisely at six o'clock she donned her shawl and walked back down the beach toward town.

That evening Eusebio went to the movies. Since Amelita paid him with currency, not with food and gifts as did most of his patients, he was able to afford a movie now and again. He loved watching the deep-breasted American women and their handsome companions do battle in spaceships and speeding automobiles; their lives were so much more eventful than his own, so much more important-seeming, one might easily mistake them for gods fighting evil and relaxing afterwards in their comfortably furnished heavens. But that evening's film was not the sort he favored: a religious epic

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attended by equal numbers of drunken mestizo youths who made cruel jokes at the expense of the Virgin Mary, and devout grandmothers who wept into their handkerchiefs and cried "Aiee, Dios!" when the ray of the angel touched her stomach.

It depressed Eusebio. Though he felt a certain amount of reverence for the Christian myth, it troubled him that these people were so concerned with a dead, foreign god while their own gods were tormented, dying at the edge of the sea beyond the jagged bursts of lightning. Soon they would be dead, and then the land would be given over utterly to the Communists or the imperialists. It mattered little to Eusebio which would prevail: they were, in his eyes, two varieties of jackals snarling over the bones of a fallen beast.

As he exited the theater he spotted Captain Portales sitting alone beneath a faded, striped umbrella at the sidewalk café. None of the other tables were occupied; people sought to avoid him during the latter, more unpredictable stages of his daily drunk. Eusebio started to slink away, but Captain Portales saw him. "Eusebio!" he called. "Come here!"

Reluctantly, Eusebio approached, stopping a few paces from the table. The captain was very drunk. His face was pale and sweaty in the spill of yellow light from the hotel window; his eyes rolled blearily, trying to focus on Eusebio, and his tunic was half-unbuttoned, exposing matted curls of black hair.

"Eusebio!" he said in a hoarse, agonized voice, as if that name were the answer to a soul-stirring question which possessed him. He pulled out his revolver and waved it unsteadily in Eusebio's direction.

Though he was afraid, Eusebio did not run. Looking at the black, empty barrel wavering back and forth made him feel sleepy and distant from his fear. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the movie crowd had not dissipated, but was standing under the marquee, watching in absolute silence. A bubble of spittle broke on the captain's lips. Eusebio stared at the gun, stoic, unflinching. Suddenly, a flash of heat lightning lit half the sky with an orange glow and caught the captain's attention; his eyes swiveled up to the heavens and his mouth dropped open. "Unhh," he said, trying once again to bring his sight to bear on Eusebio, and then his head lolled back, and the pistol clanged on the tabletop.

So great was Eusebio's fear that he stood rooted to the spot for almost half an hour, thinking the captain was pretending to be unconscious, waiting for him to walk away before firing. But finally, as the first cold drops of rain came pelting down, he ran, zig-zagging across the square, expecting a bullet at any second: a solitary figure darting in and out of the shadow of Santa Maria del Onda whose bell towers were raised in grim silhouette against artillery-

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like flashes of lightning.

The next afternoon, when Amelita arrived for her appointment, Eusebio noticed that a bruise darkened her cheek and the corner of her lip was swollen. Her mood was distracted. She did not even glance at him on entering, and while she undressed she laughed several times, a brittle laughter, as if recalling some irony. Rather than posing demurely before him, she thrust out her breasts, and instead of folding her hands in front of her, she rested them on the jut of her pelvic bones and gazed up to the thatched roof, unmindful of his herbs and his chanting; and when he knelt to sing for the child, she moved her hips a fraction of an inch forward so her pubic tuft brushed against his mouth. Eusebio could not resist. The sour, damp secret of her was a miracle to his lips, as was the hot copper of her belly which hung above him like a burnished hill. She pulled him erect by the hair and kissed him and led him to the hammock where they lay pressed tightly together in the cocoon of rough cloth.

"You cannot enter me or you will injure the child." Her voice was husky, her eyes half-closed. "But you may touch me here ... like so ... and here, and I can do this. ..."

Afterwards she laid his hand on her belly so he could feel the child. "This is no longer Claudio's child," she said fiercely. "It is ours! You are its father, not that pale inch of a man! It is Patuca!"

"You speak with such pride of the Patuca," said Eusebio. "But we are not a great people." Having tasted her, loved her, he saw her in a new light. She was no longer the goddess materializing from the darkness of his hut; she was real to him now. He had touched the black Indian root of her which forked in her blood, twitching her this way and that; but he loved her no less for knowing her. "It is the gods who are great," he said sadly, "and even they are dying."

But Amelita did not hear him, brimming with old hatred and new passion, and she pulled Eusebio to her once again, and he responded; yet whenever he surfaced for a moment from the heat and confusion of love, he said to himself: *The captain will kill me. She will not tell him, but he will know, and he will kill me!*

She did not leave until well past six o'clock, and when she had gone, armed with a futile lie about visiting her family in Truxillo, Eusebio walked out onto the beach. He was troubled and afraid. The palm crowns were thrashing in the wind; lightning tore down the velvet blackness beyond the reef. He did not bother to fetch a notebook, but he squatted in the sand and stared into the storm for hours. Bolt after bolt spread fiery cracks across the sky, and Eusebio began to feel that the lightning was running its fire along the circuits of his body, finding out the patterns of his nerves and imprinting its message. Dazed, half-hypnotized, his brain full

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of tearing light, he staggered back up the beach toward the corral and fell on his knees beside the gate. The little bull Imaginación, black and perfectly formed, yet no bigger than a calf, gazed at him from between the driftwood railings, and Eusebio saw in the bull's eye an image of lightning holding steady: a three-pronged bolt centering the pupil, its middle prong the shortest, giving it the aspect of a devil's pitchfork.

A sign, a revelation ... of what, Eusebio was unsure, but on impulse he loosed the thatched cord which bound the gate and swung it open. The bull stepped forth, snorted once and tossed its head, then trotted purposefully off along the beach toward Puerto Morada, vanishing into the toiling dark. Suddenly Eusebio's fears were washed away by a wave of drowsiness and contentment so powerful that he did not even have the strength of will to return to his hut, and he fell asleep in the wet sand.

The following day Amelita arrived at her usual hour, and they kissed and caressed in the hammock until the moon had risen high above the palms, penetrating the brushwood walls and painting silver stripes over their coppery skins. Her mood was joyful, unfettered, and she explained that her happiness was due not only to the pleasure she found with Eusebio, but also because of what had befallen Captain Portales the previous evening. He had waked in the middle of the night, bellowing about an enormous black bull which was goring him, trampling him into a mire of blood and sand.

"You should have seen him," she said, disgusted. "Making stupid dream noises and stumbling through the house, trying to find his pistol. I have never seen him so afraid!"

The nightmare, she said, had haunted him all day long, and he had not eaten or slept and would not leave the house for fear of encountering the bull.

Eusebio then told her about his experience during the storm and how he had loosened the little bull Imaginación. Amelita propped herself up on an elbow and stared at him thoughtfully. "At last you have discovered the purpose of those animals. They have taken on the aspect of their names, and now you must send them against Claudio. The image of the lightning was three-pronged, was it not? And are there not three animals? Tonight you must send the second one!"

Her arguments were persuasive, supported as they were by the pressure of her breasts sliding across his chest. She teased his lips with her swollen nipples, swaying above him, drowning him in the falls of her hair; she seemed, herself, a magical animal, and he tasted the moonlight striping her skin, like a beast lapping a trickle of cold silver in the midst of a coppery desert. And so he was persuaded, though not without a measure of reluctance. He felt no irresistable urge toward action as he had

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when he loosed Imaginación, and there was no storm to guide him, no lightning to imprint its wisdom onto his nerves. The air was torpid, unstirring, and mountainous clouds piled up on the horizon. "I will wait for the storm," he said to Amelita, but she would not hear of it. "Now," she whispered, tracing seductive patterns on his stomach with skillful fingers. "Destroy this barrier between us!"

Eusebio went out to the corral and stood for a while looking at Magico the five-legged sheep; its fifth leg grew malformed and stumpy from its chest, and its eyes were stupidly dull. Balls of dried dung clung to the wool of its rear end and clacked together when it walked. He was sure the short middle prong of lightning in the bull's eye had signified Magico, because magic, as he told Amelita, is no longer efficacious. Names and semblances, the secretions of enemies and the natural sympathy between objects ... all the devices of magic had become unreliable. The power of gods had ebbed from the body of the land, leaving a magical residue of doubtful potency which was difficult to tap and to control. Eusebio thought and thought how best to utilize the five-legged sheep, but no inspiration sought him out. At length he decided to do what his father, also a healer, might have done. He prayed, chanted, and abased himself; then he slit Magico's throat with a machete, collected the blood in a basin, skinned and butchered the fifth leg and steeped it in blood. "Take this," he said to Amelita. "Make a stew of it and feed it to your husband."

Amelita kissed him happily, lifted up the bloody leg to the stars, and sang her hatred, but Eusebio was dispirited and he could not sleep after she had gone.

She did not return the next day. Twilight deepened over the beach, as if an impalpable purple dust were filtering down, and since twilight is the hour when magical truths can be most clearly apprehended by those inclined to see them, the hour when the forms of daylight are dispersing and those of night have not yet taken shape, Eusebio was visited by the certain knowledge that he had made a grievous error in slaughtering Magico; and he was equally certain that Amelita's absence was the signal of Captain Portales's imminent arrival. He considered fleeing, but escape would serve no one. The captain might kill Amelita in his stead — and where, after all, could he go: into the jungle highlands to live in the constant rain like an amphibious animal, his shelters rotting away and his food tasting of mildew and worms? Disconsolate, he wandered the beach, picking the sand clear of flotsam, tossing driftwood twigs and bottles behind the corral where Solitario rested his head on the top rail, motionless, his eyes glowing redly in the westering sun.

Darkness fell; Eusebio cooked a meal of beans and tortillas, and ate slowly, looking round the hut at his

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meager possessions: the stove, the hammock, a twig broom, a broken radio, a dog-eared picture torn from a magazine showing Cinderella's palace at Disneyland. He'd always wanted to see it. The thought that somewhere in the world there stood a new and brightly pennoned palace was a source of wonder to him. Even though Raimundo Esteves, the appliance dealer's son who had twice vacationed in Florida, had told him the palace was a facade — it had no rooms, and you could only walk through the big tunnel in its bottom — still Eusebio perceived it as a testament to the vitality of old ideas. He informed Raimundo that the purpose of the palace's builders might not be at variance with the purposes of palaces in general, and that just because it was thronged by children did not mean it was less a palatial conception. He had not known exactly what he himself had meant, but it made him feel superior to see Raimundo's confusion.

Just after dark Don Guillermo came trudging down the beach to warn him of the coming storm. It would be, he said, one of those murderous tropical disturbances with the names of madwomen like Fifi or Diane, who sway their skirts of rain and slash windy knives and mutilate the coast. Don Guillermo was a tall, florid, white-haired man, once a famous athlete in America, but now running to fat; he passed the nights writing poetry and drinking whiskey by the light of a hurricane lamp. His brown eyes sparked with flecks of topaz fire left over from the former man.

Eusebio gave him coffee and said he would be fine; he would stake Solitario higher amid the palms and keep watch on the storm. When Don Guillermo asked him what had become of Magico and Imaginación, Eusebio told him they had run away. They sat for a time without speaking, and then Don Guillermo pursed his lips and sighed.

"Let me give you some money," he said. "Everyone knows what is going on between you and Amelita Portales. Sooner or later her husband will kill you unless you leave."

Eusebio shrugged. How could he explain to an American the weight of his acceptance? The idea of escape was alien to his concept of existence. No one escaped. If you succeeded in dodging a bullet, then it would strike down your friend or your lover, and your ensuing torment would be far more onerous than simple oblivion. He thanked Don Guillermo for his offer, said he would think it over, and wished him good night.

The storm broke around midnight, and Eusebio went out to the corral. Cold rain stung his face, the wind howled and snapped palm trunks higher on the hill, and he knew his hut would not survive, would flutter up into the sky and fall upon Puerto Morada in a thousand pieces. He gentled Solitario, fed him sugar, and whispered nonsense in his ear. Lightning began to strike down along the edge of

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the shore, blinding, deafening, and Solitario reared. Eusebio hung onto his neck, fearful he would leap the railings and come to harm in the jungle, but then a single hellish bolt struck nearby and played its forked ends over the sand: a jagged, yellow-white stick jabbing the earth and making a loud sizzle, not dissipating, continuing to dance upon the sand, spearing it, as if a circuit had been opened between earth and sky. Solitario stopped his struggles and stood trembling, and, at that exact instant, Eusebio looked by chance into his left eye.

Revealed by the lightning bolt, the eye glowed like a stone kindled by magic, and Eusebio saw within it to a new depth. The eye was written in lightnings, lightnings he could now decipher! Far below the outer layer of glistening fibers, the cartilaginous strings tinged with milky blue and pale rose, there lay a complex knot of barbed strands, interlocked, interwoven, and they described an involute operation centering upon this particular moment in time. In certain patternings of the strands Eusebio recognized the actions of all the people he knew in the town, and more besides whom he now knew by perceiving their brilliant signatures. There was Amelita ... her pattern a sequence of glittering silver diagonals which reminded him of the moonlight striping her skin on the previous evening; and there a matted weave of lightnings identical to the curls of black hair on Captain Portales's chest; and there was Don Guillermo's pattern, Raimundo's. ... He saw what some men might call the past and the future, the history of Puerto Morada, but to Eusebio it was merely a pattern and timeless: time was a less integral constituent of the universe than were the strands in Solitario's eye, a single element aiding in their composition, seeming to run backward into the future from the moment and forward into the past, swirling round in meaningless eddies.

He saw all this as you might see the whole of history from atop a mountain built by a god for the sole purpose of your climbing up and seeing, and this vision was both a reward for his wisdom in following the old ways and a punishment for his abuse of them under the influence of love. And so, upon unraveling the last strand of Puerto Morada's truth, its intricate knot compounded of time, magic, matter, spirit, good and evil — thus all our lives are knotted and thus we must unravel them to see — Eusebio was not surprised on turning round to find Captain Portales standing by the gate of the corral. His polished boots were clotted with sand, his drenched uniform clung to his skin, and a veil of rain spilled off the peak of his cap, making his features seem a furious waxen mask dissolving away from an expression of liverish, snarling lips and yellowed teeth.

Eusebio pressed his cheek against Solitario's muzzle and gave him a piece

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of sugar, regarding the captain with sad interest but not with fear. There was no longer any point in being afraid; he could not escape this conclusion any more than could the captain. He thought, then, of his father who had died while banishing an evil spirit in the village of Sayaxche, stricken by fever, wondering if he had suffered such a just and visionary fate; and he thought also of Amelita, whose coppery flesh had served as the ground for the lightnings of this moment. He regretted not having made love with her once again. She was so beautiful! She had not loved him ... or perhaps her love had been simply an impotent residue left by a magical tide which had ebbed from her body when she married outside the tribe for reasons less virtuous than love. His memories of her whirled up in a migration of glittering fragments and crossed his interior sky, preceding him, pointing out the direction of his own inevitable flight.

Captain Portales' mouth worked soundlessly against the din of the storm, shouting an imprecation. Eusebio smiled. The man was pitiable! He, Eusebio, was the fortunate one. For who would care to endure the prolonged agonies which were to be the captain's: the spiritual abcesses, the tortuous deteriorations of the flesh. Lightning seared down the sky, igniting the palm crowns like ritual candles, blasting the sand into a fiery grit, but neither of them noticed, wholly involved in enacting the pattern buried within Solitario's eyes. The captain stepped forward and drew his pistol, aiming. Eusebio hoped it would not hurt. He flinched as the final bolt of lightning leaped from Captain Portales's hand.

It was, said the townspeople over cups of coffee and glasses of aguardiente, truly a miraculous shot. Inspired by the murderous fury of the storm, Captain Portales had reached the pinnacle of his powers as a man and sent his bullet unerringly through Eusebio's left eye: his eye of wizardly power. But that was not the miraculous thing! The bullet had exited Eusebio's skull and penetrated Solitario's eye, killing them both in the same fraction of a second. Such a shot, remarked Don Guillermo in a letter home, might be construed as the orchestration of heavenly powers, a master's delicate touch laid upon the storm's final crescendo like a trumpet note sounding forth from the swell.

The townspeople grieved for Eusebio; he had been their friend and counselor, and they had not cherished him properly, they thought, and regretted not having invited him to this or that function, having spoken harshly to him and not paying his fees. But, they said, at least his death had served a purpose, or so it seemed: the act of murder had unmanned Captain Portales, ridded him totally of his capacity for action. He haunted the sidewalk café

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of the Hotel Circo del Mar, drinking from its opening until its close, neglecting his duties, allowing the infrequent guerrilla attacks to go unpunished. His hand trembled when he poured, and flies preened themselves on his knuckles, unafraid of his sluggish reactions.

It was rumored that he suffered nightmares in which he was trampled and gored by a huge black bull, that his digestion was poor and he could no longer eat meat, having an especial aversion to mutton and lamb. His health declined and his skin grew as yellow-gray and wrinkled as a manatee's. The townpeople sent him remedies, hoping to prolong his life because they enjoyed the dissipated quality of his governance and feared a sterner replacement. Yes, at the very least, Eusebio's death had served a purpose.

And then, of course, there was the notion put forward by certain pundits of the town, that the captain's bullet had flown a more just course than even he could have predicted, and had struck a target he had hit before, only with different shot. They pointed to Amelita's son, who had been born two months after the storm, born mute and blind, his eyes nacreous globes like enormous pearls: the image of Solitario's eyes. Cataracts, said the fruit company's doctor; inoperable. But the townspeople shook their heads, dubious. Could Captain Portales's bullet, they wondered, have carried away a life and merely set it down in another flesh? Such a nicety of transmigration would be in keeping with the involute character of the Patucan gods. As the years passed, more and more credence was given this notion due to the child's strange behavior. Often, during the season of storms, he could be seen tugging at his mother's hand and leading her, though blind, on an unwavering course along the streets of Puerto Morada, past the fruit company's offices, past the Hotel Circo del Mar where Captain Portales sat stupefied, and at last to the sea wall behind the church of Santa Maria del Onda, where they would stand for hours, watching the lightning strike down beyond the reef.

Isolated against a seething backdrop of dark, silver-edged clouds and vivid lightnings, they made a strange pair: this glowing-eyed child and the beautiful Amelita, still beautiful despite the jagged streaks of gray shot through her hair and the deepened lines on her face. She had taken to wearing black, for though she was not truly Eusebio's lover, she felt the death of his body was due a measure of respect, and besides, she knew it further tormented the captain to see her in formal bereavement. Dutifully, then, she would stand with her arm about the boy, unmindful of the spray soaking her clothing, stoic in the manner of her people; and sometimes, straining toward those cryptic lightnings, his cataracted eyes reflecting their forked values, the boy would break free of her grasp and dart along

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the sea wall, turning back to her from time to time, whimpering, gesturing in terrified frustration, as if he had just received a foretelling of some distant tragedy, vast and culminative, the news of which had not yet reached the earth.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 33

In the May issue we asked competitors to submit SF or fantasy redefinitions of any word. There were somewhat fewer entries than usual, but the quality was extremely high, and once again, Ms. Jackson comes out at or near the top.

We would like to remind you that suggestions for new competitions are most welcome. if we use yours, you get credit plus a free one year subscription.

Now the winners:

FIRST PRIZE

banshee: censorship movement directed at H. Ridger Haggard

formaldehyde: Dr. Jekyll's tuxedo

gormand: one who hungers for John Norman novels

hydroid: greeting used when encounter R2-D2

impudent: toothpaste for gremlins

metronome: an urban troll

pungent: Ferdinand Feghoot

rabbet-joint: tavern in *Watership Down*

Tokenism: addiction to *Lord of the Rings;* hobbituation

zebu: haunting noise made by French ghosts

—*Jean MacKay Jackson*
Tulsa, Ok

SECOND PRIZE

crone: Oriental duplicate life form grown from a single cell

immutable: unable to mutate further

permutation: mutant hairstyle

syntax: government levy on Brothelworlds and Casinoworlds

unicorn: universally accepted humor, mainly slapstick

—*Nigel Parsons*
Cardiff, UK

RUNNERS UP

protocol: an experimental colony

robust: an arrest made by robot police

detach: to slow down a starship

algebra: women's wear from the sea

nasal: having to do with the space program of the 20th century

—*Kiti Kitiyakara*
Milwaukee, WI

merchant: song of the mermen

entomologist: one who studies Ents

rummage: intoxicated magician

halfling: to fling HAL across the room

lemmings: cult followers of Stanislaw Lem

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prattle: to make small talk about Fletcher Pratt

—*Kim Schnitzer*
Short Hills, NJ

abbot: an android priest

ancestry: illegal sexual relations between a time traveler and a progenitor

antipathy: mental communication with insects

windlass: a genetically engineered human female with the ability to fly; her counterpart would be a windmale

—*Ralph E. Vaughan*
San Diego, CA

condom: domed stadium built to house the 1994 World SF Conventions 53,000 participants

bookworm: segmented creature of great size inhabiting world of Book, planet in Herbert's eighth volume in the Dune series

paperback: thin walled creature from the third planet circling Antares, noted for its ability to inflate itself with hydrogen and rise into the air

—*R. Stanley Morse*
Chelan, WA

Elferman: a man who catches elves for a living, or as sport

—*David Wood*
Avon, England

COMPETITION 34 (suggested by Peter Pautz)

Suggest up to a dozen SF/fantasy titles that should have been written by historical figures, e.g.:

The Stand by George Armstrong Custer

"The Whimper of Whipped Dogs" by Ivan Pavlov

Out of Their Minds by Sigmund Freud

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by September 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to F&SF. Results of Competition 34 will appear in the January Issue.

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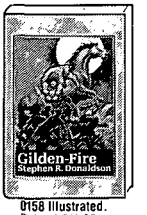

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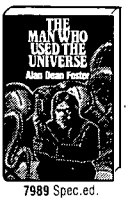

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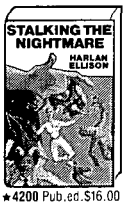

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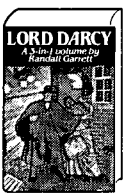

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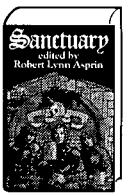

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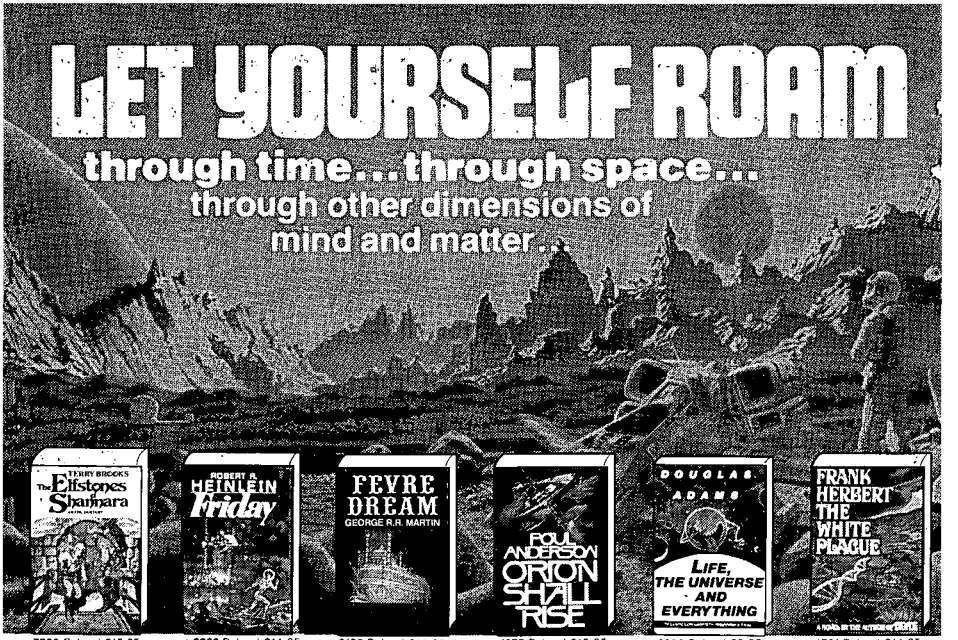

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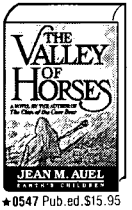

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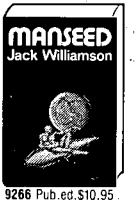

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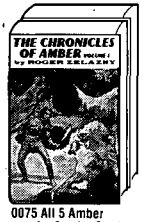

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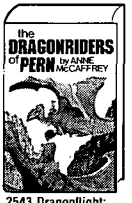

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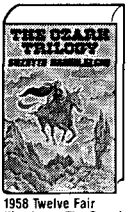

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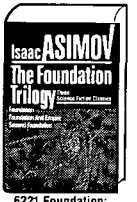

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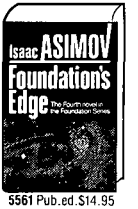

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